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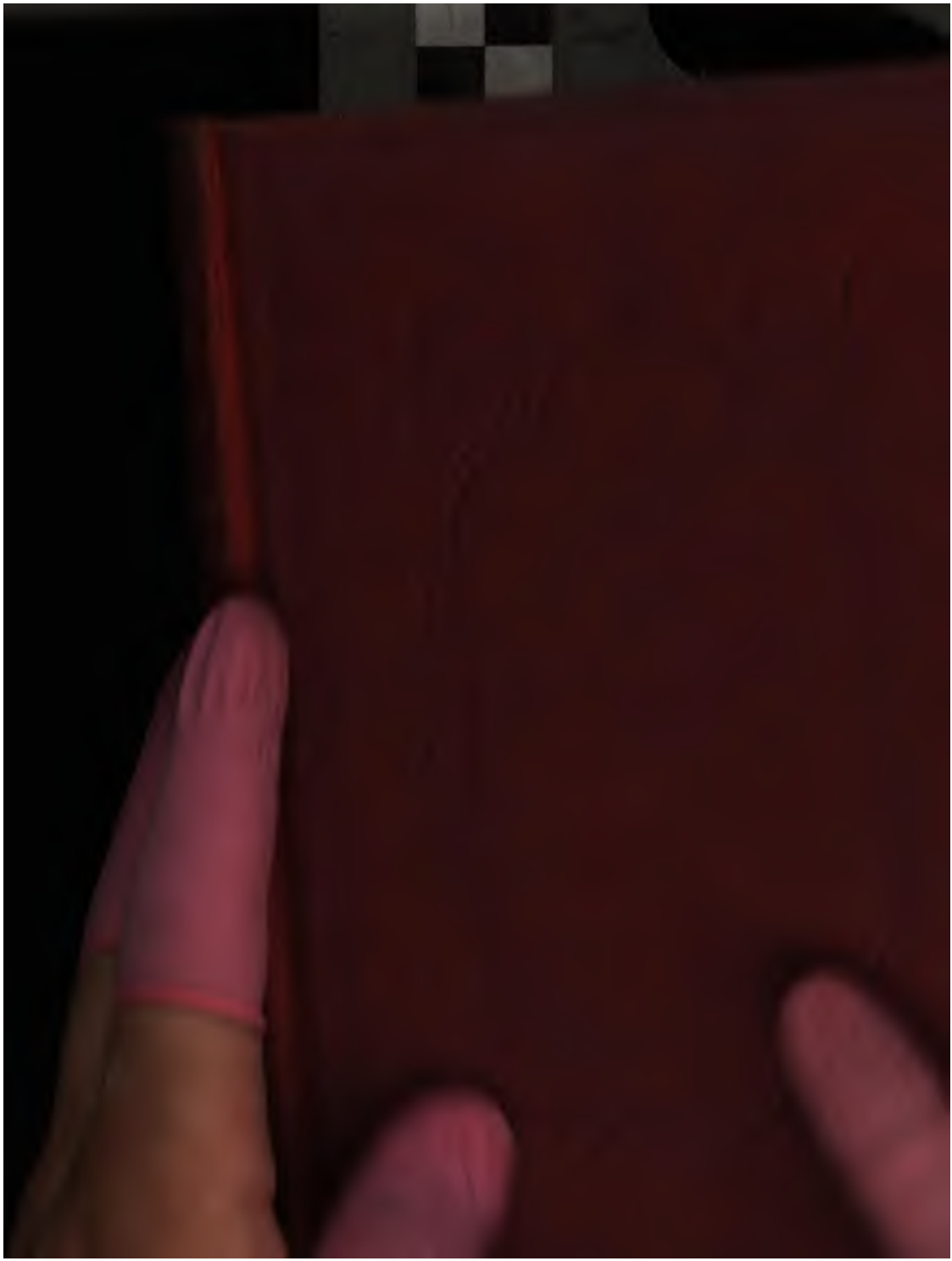

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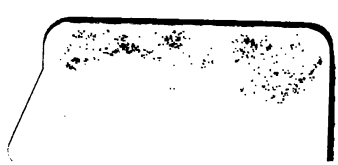


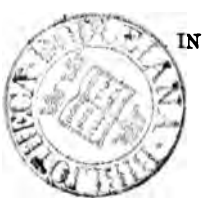
CECIL'S TRYST.

CECIL'S TRYST.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,' 'A PERFECT TREASURE,'
'LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CECIL'S TRYST.

CHAPTER I.

COMMITTED FOR TRIAL.

THE sensation produced by Batty's amazing statement on all who heard it was profound. The silence which had preceded it was broken by a confused murmur of astonishment, and then, once more, there was not a sound. All eyes had turned from Batty to Cecil, including those of my father and myself. I knew, of course, that the charge was absurd and false; but I looked to him to reply to it, just as if, had some senseless fellow struck at him in brutal jest,

I should have expected to see him ward off the blow. But since there he sat so pale and speechless, I could not choose but strike in for him in my passion, notwithstanding that his accuser was but a poor natural, with: 'You vagabond liar—'

'Hush, sir!' interposed my father sternly. 'It is not for *you* to speak.'

'Thank you, Fred,' whispered my cousin; 'thanks, my friend;' and then, with one deep sigh, he seemed to rouse himself from his stupor, and spoke aloud in his own clear tones. 'You are mistaken, Batty,' said he. 'Look at me again, and be quite sure.'

If Cecil's silence had been prejudicial to him in the opinion of the crowd, his voice and manner ought now to have redeemed it. In place of indignation at the hateful charge that had been brought against him, they only evinced gentleness and pity, though his face testified to the anguish he suffered from this random shaft, that

had pierced to his inmost heart, where lay Ruth's image.

'Yes, yes; it was Mr. Cecil,' returned Batty peevishly, but without looking my cousin in the face. 'I know him well enough. He has given me money often.'

'Silver and copper,' said Cecil, still speaking in the same calm tone; 'but surely not gold, my good fellow.'

'Only once gold—the real red gold,' persisted Batty; 'but I was to do something for that, and I did do it; and now' —here he looked at his confiscated coins with pitiful yearning—'they have taken it all away. O dear, O dear!'

'Come, come; none of this drivelling,' observed the chairman angrily. He was a thorough gentleman at heart, and felt keenly for his brother magistrate, whose nephew he was well convinced had in reality no more to do with the affair than he had himself.

'The best way will be to let the poor

fellow tell his story his own way,' whispered my father.

'Well, if you don't *mind*,' returned Mr. Close; 'but it seems to me the fellow is mad.—What do you say, Mr. Bourne?'

'Whether mad or not,' returned the old gentleman coldly, 'he is not more mad than he was five minutes ago, I suppose, when you were so bent on taking his evidence. But if Mr. Wray wishes to stop the proceedings, I for one do not wish to feed public scandal, whatever others may have done in similar cases.'

My father flushed from brow to chin at this malicious speech, but uttered not a word; and, when Mr. Close glanced towards him in a helpless sort of way, only bent his head towards Batty.

'The bench wishes to hear all you have got to say, prisoner,' said the chairman, acting on this hint. 'If Mr. Cecil did give you this money, how and when did it happen?'

'It was on the Thursday, I tell you,' said Batty, 'when I got the cold beef and pudding at the Manor-house.'

'Was it at the Manor-house that the money was given to you, or elsewhere?'

'Eh?' inquired Batty vacantly.

'What the deuce is to be done?' muttered the chairman; 'all this is but so much waste of time.'

'I think the word "elsewhere" has puzzled him, your worship,' murmured the obsequious clerk.

'Well, put the question to him yourself then,' said Mr. Close testily. 'I am not used to talk with a fool.'

With a smile that perhaps veiled the thought, 'I *am*,' the clerk obeyed.

'Did Mr. Cecil Wray give you this gold at the Manor-house?'

'No; in the fir-wood above Wayford, where I took my pudding to eat it.'

'About what time was that?'

'Why, at dinner-time of course.'

A roar of laughter burst forth from the crowd at this undesigned sally. It was not the opportuneness of the reply that provoked their mirth, but that readiness to seize upon anything facetious which is always manifested under circumstances of serious import, which gives piquancy to the small jest of the judge upon the bench, and to the unintentional *mot* in the parson's sermon; it put Batty, however, who took it as a compliment to his epigrammatic powers, in high good-humour.

'And the pudding was good, was it?' continued the clerk.

'It had plums in it,' returned the other triumphantly. 'But even the plums were not so good as the guineas that Mr. Cecil brought me. "There," said he, "is enough to buy you fifty puddings;" and I *would* ha' bought 'em, and eat 'em too, if you'd ha' let 'em bide wi' me.'

'And what were you to do for the guineas?'

'Well, I was to go into Waller's pit that night, and take away the props, he said. And so I did.—There, now, I have done wi' it.' And with the air of a man who has at last got free from his responsibilities, the poor natural made once more an attempt to leave his place of durance.

Frustrated again in that endeavour, he turned sulky, and refused to answer any more questions. The magistrates' clerk tried all his Machiavellian arts on him in vain; and, indeed, I don't believe the rack would have constrained Batty to speak a word, when in one of his morose moods.

'Is there anybody in court,' at last exclaimed the chairman wearily, 'who can throw any light upon this strange affair?'

I would have spoken long ago had not my father's rebuff forbidden me to do so; and I had only been waiting for an invitation of this kind to take advantage of it.

'I wish to be sworn, may it please your worships,' said I, stepping down from the

little platform. My father looked surprised, but said nothing; and old Bourne favoured me with one of his ugliest looks, as I got into the witness-box.

'Administer the oath,' said the chairman, with eyebrows raised to their full height. I think he was under the impression that matters had at last come to a climax, and that I was about to say that it was I who had killed Richard Waller after all. 'Now, tell us, in Heaven's name, what *you* know about this matter, young gentleman.'

'I know nothing, sir,' said I, 'about the taking away the props; but I can prove that the prisoner's story, so far as my cousin Cecil is concerned, is utterly false. On Thursday last — the date on which he is accused of having paid over this money—he was absent from Gatcombe, and in my company, at Monkton, the entire day.'

A murmur of applause broke forth in

court, which was immediately hushed, when old Mr. Bourne was seen about to speak.

'What you say is true, Mr. Frederick Wray, I have no doubt,' said he coldly; 'but the prisoner may be right in the fact, though wrong in the date.'

Then ensued a scene such as the town-hall at Holksham had never before witnessed, even in the tumult of an election time. My father, though years ago, as I have said, he had lost his seat for the county, had always been personally popular; the natural interest excited by the charge so unexpectedly brought against his relative had been largely mixed with sympathy upon his own account; and now that Cecil had been apparently exonerated from blame, that this old miser, whom everybody despised or feared, should seem still to hold him guilty, raised public indignation to the uttermost. I had never before heard that peculiar 'yah, yah,' of an English mob, in which contempt and hate

find such acid but forcible expression; and I looked with wonder at the transformation of that tossing throng, most of whom were labourers in the sand-cliff, and well known to me, but who now, as they yelled and shook their fists against their common enemy, as though they would have torn his heart out, had suddenly become unrecognisable. In the social world, perhaps, as in the physical, though all without appears so safe and solid, there is but a thin layer that hides from view the central fire.

I am bound to say that old Mr. Bourne showed himself no coward, but sat in his place looking down in grim silence upon the tumult, while my father rose and denounced it. It seemed to be his business to do so rather than that of the chairman, since the disorder had its origin partly on his own account; and he did it with a fire and energy for which few would have given him credit. It was necessary, as he afterwards apologetically explained, to spe[illegible]

the Cambyses vein, when there were only two policemen to back the voice of authority against five hundred rebels; and, at all events, he reëstablished comparative calm, during which the proceedings were concluded.

Batty was committed for trial. It was impossible that any other course could have been taken, since, though the details of his confession—to which he had stuck with as great tenacity as to the main fact—had been disproved, there was his possession of those five golden pieces to be accounted for, which, as the chairman ventured to observe without consultation with his familiar, if they had not been given him for the purpose he had stated, 'had been certainly come by by some dishonest means, which it was for a judge and jury to investigate and determine.'

Though not unconscious of the want of logic in Mr. Close's reasoning, I felt, for my own part, that the contents of poor

Batty's waistband were indeed very strong corroborative evidence of his guilt; and as for his story, notwithstanding that I had exposed its falsity with my own lips, I was well convinced that it was, at least, no fiction; not only was the poor lad utterly incapable of having invented it; he evidently believed that it was true. Such a tale might have been the delusion of a madman, but not of a poor natural such as Batty; and again, there was the gold.

After the first moment of his being so unexpectedly called upon in his own defence, Cecil had never lost his calm collected look, which had, however, an inexpressible sadness in it, as of one who had made up his mind to suffer much. As we drove home together, both my father and I endeavoured to cheer him, not by avoiding the subject which monopolised his mind, but by speculating on the strange fancy that had taken possession of Batty. That it was weird and baseless as a dream, would

have been easy to prove in any case, but the fortunate circumstance of his having given a false date to the supposed occurrence, had, we argued, removed from it all aspect of seriousness. It did not become a man of sense to be disturbed about such a matter, and so forth. But my cousin only shook his head, and held his hand up, as though in rejection of all comfort.

'But, my dear Cecil,' said I, well understanding upon whose account he was so distressed, 'this charge against you of all men, is not only absurd, but monstrous, by reason of your well-known personal regard for the Wallers.'

'Yes,' returned he gloomily, 'but suppose it should be also well known that only last night I termed poor Richard "an obstacle," and was in a manner congratulating myself upon his "removal."'

'Nobody but an Old Bailey counsel could make anything of that, I think, Cecil,' observed my father cheerfully; 'and even

as for the murder, as it is called, it remains to be proved such.'

'I believe it *was* a murder,' returned my cousin gravely. 'I believe Batty told the truth about the matter, so far as he was capable of understanding it.'

My father did not reply. I think he thought so too, as I did.

'But, if Batty was really bribed,' urged I, 'the intention of him who bribed him must have been doubly criminal, since the removal of the props not only jeopardised the life it destroyed, but that of Ruth also.'

Cecil shuddered.

'Well,' said I, 'it was you who saved her life; can any reasonable being suppose it was also you who wished to kill her?'

'That is well put,' said my father. 'Fred shall be brought up to the law.

"Adieu, Celestial Muse, adieu!
Shakespeare no more, thy silvan son,
Nor all the art of Addison,
Pope's heaven-strung lyre, nor Waller's ease,
Nor Milton's mighty self must please.

The visage wan, the purblind sight,
The toil by day, the lamp at night,
The tedious forms, the solemn prate,
The pert dispute, the dull debate,
The drowsy bench, the babbling hall,
For thee, Old Bailey, welcome all."'

Unselfishness was as much a characteristic of my father, as the quoting from ancient authors, and I felt that though doing his best to arouse Cecil from his gloom, he was himself much disturbed in mind. The malicious conduct of old Mr. Bourne during the late inquiry had vexed him; and he was still more annoyed with himself at being vexed at anything such a man could do. Moreover, he detested publicity: *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo* might have been his motto, though he was neither proud nor unsympathetic; and now, it was only too probable that our family name would be in everybody's mouth for some time to come.

We brought home with us, of course, the contagion of our melancholy; and no-

body would have recognised that night in our little party the same which had been so gay, and bent on gaiety, scarce a week ago. Cousin Jane did not make her appearance, but her brother visited her in her room, and I understood that she had received his news with her accustomed philosophy. She treated Batty's story with great contempt, and as being a fabrication from beginning to end.

'Depend upon it,' she said, 'there is nobody to blame in the matter but the fool himself, who is not without a method in his madness. If he had been well whipped on the first occasion when he stole the props (as he ought to have been), he would never have done it again.'

For the moment, Cecil, accustomed to defer to the opinions of his sister, was a little comforted; but on his asking her how she accounted for Batty's possession of the gold, her reply, though by no means without sagacity, was less satisfactory.

'Why, he stole it, of course, as he stole the props,' said she; 'and thus endeavours to excuse himself from two charges (one of them by anticipation), by one and the same story. If I had been chairman of the magistrates' bench, instead of Mr. Justice Shallow, I would have dealt with the matter summarily enough.'

Which I believed she would have done, and most devoutly wished she had.

Poor Aunt Ben, on the other hand, was utterly demoralised by what had happened, and constantly dissolved in tears. She already beheld Cecil in the clutches of the law, out of which she was by no means of opinion that innocence always emerged triumphant.

'They will swear anything,' she sobbed, 'those lawyers' (whose position she vaguely confused with that of witnesses for the prosecution); 'and the cleverest of them are somehow always on the wrong side.'

'But, my dear aunt,' urged I, 'there

is nó sane person who even hints at Cecil being concerned in the matter.'

'I hope not, Frederick; I should like to see them at it,' returned she indignantly. 'The dear boy is, of course, as innocent as a lamb; and even if he wasn't,' added she, throwing her arms about his neck and bursting into tears, 'his old Aunt Ben would love him all the same.'

Her naïveté did not even raise a smile among us. Cecil was far too wretched to be moved to mirth, and beside our common distress upon his account, my father and myself had each our own trouble. The events of the day, among other disagreeables, had left, he felt, a breach between the Manor-house and the rectory: my father hated quarrels with his neighbours, and had hitherto always steered clear of them; and as for me, though I neither had nor could have any quarrel with Eleanor, it was only too probable that I should be from henceforth debarred from her society.

Late in the evening, however, the Rector came down to us accompanied by his daughter, and expressed himself in a very frank and generous fashion. I had no idea that in so dull and pompous a personage there could have existed so much manly feeling; it had always seemed to me that there was not stuff enough in the Rev. John Bourne to make a gentleman, but I had been mistaken.

Without any undutiful reference to his father's unfriendly conduct towards us at the trial, of which he had probably received an exaggerated account, he gave us to understand that the report of it had annoyed and distressed him exceedingly.

Aunt Ben, however, received him with great stiffness (it is the women who perpetuate, even when they do not make, our family vendettas), and very soon left the room, on pretence of looking after Jane.

Cecil had withdrawn himself when the

door-bell had announced the arrival of visitors.

'I am sorry not to see my friend and pupil,' said the Rector warmly. 'I regret beyond measure that he should have been exposed to this wicked slander, and especially that any relative of mine should have acted otherwise than to have put his foot upon it, and stamped it out as soon as named.'

My father was deeply moved, and I think as much taken by surprise by this generous behaviour as myself.

'Mr. Bourne,' he said, 'did but do his duty as a magistrate, though he certainly might have evinced a more neighbourly feeling. His expression was that the prisoner might have been right in the fact, though incorrect in the date.'

'It is impossible that he could have been right in the fact,' observed the Rector vehemently.

'As to Cecil, of course,' returned my

father. 'What Mr. Bourne doubtless meant to add was, that the statement was also incorrect as to the person.'

'You are most kind to say so,' said the Rector; 'that is certainly what he ought to have said, and what I hope he will make a point of saying in public upon the first opportunity. It is in my opinion only what he owes to your nephew.'

My father bowed stiffly, with a grave smile. The idea of any public explanation of old Mr. Bourne's being required to set his kinsman right in the eyes of the world seemed unpleasantly absurd.

'Can I see Cecil himself?' asked the Rector hesitatingly.

'Go and fetch him, Fred,' said my father.

I left the room, but waited in the hall for Eleanor, who, I guessed, would follow me, under pretence of seeing Jane. It was evident that the two gentlemen wished to be alone, perhaps in order to speak of Batty.

'How shocking all this is!' cried she, bursting into tears for the first time. 'Poor, poor Cecil!'

'My dear Nelly,' said I, comforting her in lovers' fashion, 'you need not take it so to heart; it is only a nine days' wonder after all. The assizes will have been held by that time, and the real criminal have doubtless got his deserts.'

'Then you think there *is* a criminal, do you, Fred?' asked she with a frightened air.

'I do,' said I gravely; 'Batty could never have invented such a story. That he was bribed to take those props by somebody, I have hardly a doubt.'

'That is what Ruth says. I had hoped that she took a prejudiced view of the matter, on account of the words she heard her poor brother say — those last terrible words, that are always haunting her.'

I shook my head. 'It is useless to deceive ourselves, dear Nelly; there is a great

mystery about this sad matter, which has not its beginning in poor Batty. How did Ruth take the news of to-day's doings?'

'That is what I wanted to see you about, dear Fred. When she first heard of that wicked attempt to implicate Cecil, I thought she would have broken her heart. She begged and prayed of me to send for him at once, but I dared not do it; and presently my grandfather came in—and—and—there has been a quarrel between him and your father, and he spoke very bitterly against the family, and especially against Cecil, in Ruth's presence, just as though he had really been the guilty person; and Ruth spoke up for him to his face—who could blame her for it?—and he bade her leave the house at once, and she is gone.'

'Good heavens! gone whither?'

'I do not know. I was not allowed to speak with her. Grandpapa is so hard, you know.'

Here I heard the drawing-room bell

ring, and knowing that it was for Cecil, we parted hastily. I ran up to my cousin's room, but it was empty. I called: 'Cecil, Cecil!' at the top of my voice, but there was no reply. I looked at my watch; it was nearly eleven o'clock. Then I went downstairs, and learnt from Martha that my cousin had left the house immediately after Mr. Bourne and Miss Eleanor had arrived. Whither could he have gone at such a time of night, and on what errand? A cold despair crept to my heart, as the thought flashed upon me: 'Suppose he should have gone away for good?' What a terrible misnomer would that 'for good' be, had he really fled with Batty's ghastly accusation hanging over him!

CHAPTER II.

A GHOSTLY WALK.

'WHERE is Cecil?' asked my father impatiently, as I reëntered the drawing-room. 'I hope he does not refuse to see Mr. Bourne.'

'It is not that,' said I. 'He is not to be found. He has left the house.'

'Left the house!' repeated both my father and the Rector; and they looked at one another with the same thought in their minds, as I could well perceive, which had already occurred to myself.

'But where is he gone to? Has he left no message? Have you no idea, Fred, what has become of him?' There was not only perplexity in my father's tones, but positive alarm.

'There is only one place that I can think of,' replied I with hesitation; 'he may have gone to Wayford.'

'I trust not, indeed,' observed the Rector hastily. 'Ruth Waller has gone home to her cottage. It would be a most improper proceeding.'

'Go and see, Fred,' said my father gravely. Impropriety had become, it was evident, a secondary consideration in his eyes. 'Tell the servants that they may retire. I will sit up for you myself.'

'Had *you* not better go, or *I*, and bring him back?' suggested the Rector.

'No,' said my father curtly. 'I rely upon Fred's judgment and strength of character.'

This was gratifying, and more especially so since I knew that my father had hitherto been not well pleased by my conduct with respect to Cecil and the girl; but I must say I did not welcome the responsibility. If Ruth had been a ward in Chancery, and I had been furnished with a decree of that

high court, launched against her contumacious swain, I should have had my doubts of the success of my enterprise; but as it was, what arguments had I to use beside those which had already proved fruitless? What hold had I upon him? I was well acquainted with my cousin's impulsive character, and a double source of apprehension now possessed me; it suddenly struck me that they had gone off *together*. Cecil was always plentifully supplied with money; and finding this beautiful creature alone, and in distress, I could easily imagine that, blinded by passion, and eager to escape from a locality which recent events had rendered hateful to him—but no; I could not wrong him thus, even in thought; it would be time enough to think ill of my friend when he had proved himself in fault. The next minute, I had snatched my cap from its peg, and was on the moonlit road.

I ran at that swift but steady pace that is meant to last, and which admits of the

mind communing with itself as well as of taking impressions from without; and in order to avoid the risk of meeting any one who might inquire my errand (though this was not likely, for our folks at Gatcombe kept very early hours), I took the terrace way. Not a sound but that of my own panting breath disturbed the midnight silence. Nature, asleep, lay stretched before me for many a mile, in all her loveliness, lit up by the pale light of the moon. Each field and farm stood out distinct and clear, most recognisable, yet not familiar; for a landscape, under such circumstances, resembles its own self at noonday only as some fair virgin, newly dead, resembles herself in life. The brightness and the glory are fled, but a spiritual beauty, born of calm and peace, reigns in their place. Alas, thought I, how soon the parallel ends; for the world will wake to life and light again, while the beauty of the dead will fade and change to unutterable horrors. Then, with a flash, my

errant thought reverted to Richard Waller and his terrible fate, the scene of which I was approaching. It was more than a mile ahead; but the hearselike canopy of firs that overhung it was distinctly visible, looking blacker even than it was wont to do by daylight. My lonely path had already led me by many a gaping cave which had proved, at one time or another, the sepulchre of a living man; but with such catastrophes I had been only acquainted by report. The Wayford pit, which I had to pass on my road to Ruth's cottage, had given up its dead before my own eyes. A vague terror suddenly beset me, and shook my knees as I ran on. Should I once stop even for a moment, I felt that it would have overcome me utterly. My nerves were naturally strong enough, but the events of the last few days had unstrung them; and perhaps I had cultivated my imagination somewhat to the neglect of my reasoning powers. At all events, I felt a strong inclination to descend

the sand-cliff at once, and take the lower road. On the other hand, though there was none to see me, I experienced a sense of shame at such a proceeding. I debated the matter with myself, thought arguing with thought within me, as it was often wont to do. The case is not uncommon, perhaps, with those who have lived long without companions of their own age; but it is no sign of a healthy mental condition. Had my father, at my age, been in my place, he would, I know, have given way to no such weakness for an instant, and that idea gave me courage. The Wrays had never been given to fear of any sort; my uncle had been bold to audacity; even Aunt Ben would have approached yonder wood, if duty had called her so to do, as fearlessly as she would have gone to her garden. Was I, then, to be the first coward of my race? I ran on at increased speed. Perhaps it was *that* which caused my heart to beat so loudly that I could hear it as I reached the

pine-wood. The white terrace was flooded with the moonlight, and made the grove intensely black. A whisper ran through its dark plumes, which I had heard a thousand times, but it had never said, 'Hush, hush! the dead is here,' as it did now.

In the front of each cave was a little covered hut in which the scythe-stones were wont sometimes to be roughly chipped, before they were taken home to undergo the more delicate operations. I had often seen Richard Waller sitting in the one to which I was now drawing near, and heard his shrill yearning cough — and I heard it *now*. Yes, with the sweat-drops on my forehead, with every vein in my body filled to bursting, and my heart beating like a steam-engine, I stopped and listened to it now. It was full a minute before the sound was repeated, and then I recognised it for what it really was, the creaking of a tree-top in some breeze of the upper air. I blushed from chin to brow as I

thought how my father, with his faith in my 'strength of character,' would have blushed for me, and then walked resolutely on. I no longer ran; I was resolved to punish myself for having given way to such abject weakness. I would not even avert my eyes from the pit-mouth as I passed by, nor did I. The hut I have spoken of had hitherto had its back towards me, but I came now into full view of it; and, horror of horrors! there sat in it a human figure, huddled up and cramped together, just as I had seen that of Richard Waller when he was taken dead out of the cave — the head was dropped upon the hands, and the elbows resting on the knees; and 'Hush, hush! the dead is here,' said the trees again.

In my last experience, I thought I had undergone all that fear could inflict, but I had been mistaken; that had been but panic, whereas this was veritable terror, unspeakable, unimaginable, and yet a thou-

sand times intensified by the imagination. The self-same sight that Eliphaz, the Temanite, beheld in his dream, seemed now to be before me in reality; and 'the hair of my flesh stood up,' like his, and my bones shook. If the Thing had moved or cried out, I verily believe my wits would have fled for ever, if not my life; but it remained quite still, and I, as still, stood staring at it. I cannot express the relief to my mind, and also my grateful sense of that relief, when the fact was presently made apparent to me that it was no ghost, but my cousin Cecil. He might have been dead himself, however, for any sign of life he gave; and, remembering my own terrors, I took care to make no sudden exclamation, but called him by his name in a low voice. As it turned out, however, I need have taken no such precaution, for he answered, 'Yes, it is I,' in a sad and unconcerned voice, with neither start nor expression of astonishment at seeing me.

'My father sent me for you,' said I; 'he is distressed and alarmed at your absence, and so are we all.'

'Ah,' replied he wearily, 'it is late, I suppose. I will come home.'

'But, my dear Cecil,' said I, approaching him, and taking his hand, which was very hot and feverish, 'why are you here at all at such a time?'

'Why not?' said he. 'Is it not said that murderers have an irrepressible desire to revisit the scene of their crimes?'

'But you are not Richard Waller's murderer,' said I soothingly.

'No,' answered he firmly; 'but I desire above all things to meet with the man who was.'

'You are not serious, Cecil, or if so, you are not yourself,' observed I gravely.

'No, that is true,' he answered. Then, with a deep sigh, but with all his old kindliness of tone, he added, 'Ah, Fred, this day has done for your friend and kinsman;

my life is going out altogether: in this foul breath of report, it can no more exist than can a candle-flame in a damp cave.'

'The breath of a fool,' said I, 'is of less account than the breeze among those firs. How can you take such rubbish to heart?'

'Nay, Batty spoke the truth in the main, Fred,' answered my cousin solemnly. 'It is useless to discredit him. Even Rue thinks that.'

'Have you seen her since—since the magistrates' meeting?'

'Yes; just now: she parted from me here not half an hour ago. I called at the rectory to see her; but Mr. Bourne had turned her out of doors, for disbelieving that I had tried to kill her brother, and she had gone home. She is at the cottage yonder, all alone.'

'And you followed her thither?'

'Yes,' said he, observing, perhaps, some dryness in the tone of the inquiry. 'What then?'

'Nothing, my dear Cecil, only, since you seem so nervously sensitive to the ravings of a poor natural, it surprises me that you should have exposed yourself and Ruth, by such an act of imprudence, to be talked about by the whole village.'

'I was obliged to see her, Fred; I was indeed. But I did not stay beneath her roof; perhaps I dared not; at all events, I brought her here—here, where her brother was murdered but a week ago, and where she herself, by a miracle, was saved from death. It is not a spot, you will allow, for love-passages. Yet, here we first plighted troth.' He looked about him in a pitiful sad way, as though the girl herself had been dead, and only her memory associated with the scene. 'Well, she loves me still, notwithstanding what Batty has said; and I verily believe, had I pressed her to do so, would have fled with me this very night.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I did not doubt that in the least; for, indeed,

I did not. My heart, perhaps, was somewhat hardened against the girl who had been the cause of so much trouble to us all; and, moreover, though my cousin was so dear in my own eyes, I did not think him one likely to have inspired a disinterested affection in those of Ruth. I nodded gravely, and he went on.

'She loves me dearly, Fred, and I believe for my own sake,' said he piteously, as though perceiving my thought. 'And I, O, I never loved her as now, when we are parted perhaps for ever!'

He sat down again on the bench, from which he had risen in his passionate excitement, and buried his face in his hands.

'Parted for ever?' repeated I, in wondering tones.

'Of course,' said he simply. 'How can it be otherwise, whilst this monstrous charge hangs over me; and who can tell if it will ever be removed? Do you suppose that while this shadow of suspicion lingers, that

I would marry Richard Waller's sister; and it may linger long, perhaps for ever! If poor Batty sticks to his story, as I think he will do, this horrible affair, whether he be right or wrong, may remain a mystery for ever; and if it does, so help me heaven—— But there, I have already sworn it to her on this spot, where the blood of her brother cries out for vengeance. I will drag out my days alone; for I *am* alone when Rue is absent.'

To one who did not know my cousin, or only saw in him a youth of twenty, impulsive, and perplexed by grievous trouble, these would have seemed but wild and wandering words; but to me they were both sad and serious. If the cloud that hung over Richard Waller's fate should never be dispelled by the rays of truth, I felt that it was only too likely to darken Cecil's life for many a day; but, on the other hand, it seemed almost certain that it would be dispelled. Few cases that are sifted in a

criminal court leave much that is unaccountable behind, and I had good hope of the coming trial not only putting Cecil's innocence beyond a doubt—for that was within my own power to do—but of fixing the crime upon the real offender.

'My dear Cecil,' said I assuringly, 'in two days' time, you will, I both hope and believe, be wholly free from these forebodings; you are cheerless and dispirited now, as you well may be. This spot itself, with its melancholy associations, is sufficient to depress anybody's spirits. Let us come home. My father told me that he should sit up for us.'

'I am sorry he is doing that,' said Cecil, rising, and immediately moving homewards, 'and very sorry, believe me, to be giving trouble and sorrow to those from whom I have received such unmerited kindness. It is very poor repayment, Fred.'

'My dear Cecil,' interrupted I, 'such words, I am sure, would distress my father

much more than any trouble you may have caused him from a matter beyond your own control; for we know that Love is such, which

> "Rushes on one like a mighty stream,
> And bears one in a moment far from shore."

I have heard my father himself repeat those lines as though he had once experienced what he had quoted, and yet he calls himself a philosopher. You might say with his favourite Chamberlayne—

> "Is't a sin to be
> Born high, that robs me of my liberty?"

or ask, with Massinger, why

> "Riches, with other men
> Esteemed a blessing, is to you a curse?"

We may differ from our friend in the choice of the object of his affections, but it would be folly to blame him. We do not do that even when love is unrequited.'

'At all events we should not,' said Cecil gravely; 'and yet when women place their

love where it is not reciprocated, they are both blamed and scorned.'

'Not by those whose blame or scorn is worth a farthing,' said I, pleased to win my companion, even for a little, from his private grief; 'for women's love is, after all, a more engrossing passion than ours.

"Poor love is lost in men's capacious minds,
In theirs it fills up all the room it finds."

You must excuse my old tags and scraps, Cecil,' said I, laughing; 'you know that I have learned that "damnable trick of iteration" from my father.'

'I know it,' said my cousin, sighing; 'and you have learned much else that is better of him also. Ah, Fred, of us two cousins, though I have heard myself called the more fortunate, it was you who were to be envied, and not I, even before this blow fell on me. To have had such a father as you have, is a better lot than to have inherited all the wealth of the Indies!—But

we were talking of unrequited love in woman—is your modesty, Fred, so great, that you are unaware that you yourself are the object of such affection?'

I knew at once that my cousin was referring to his sister, though certainly, had it not been for Lady Repton, I should not have known it. But how in honour could I confess it?

'I assure you,' said I, laughing, 'that the lady in question, whoever she may be, has never breathed one word of her misplaced passion in *my* ear.'

'Because she knows it would be useless,' returned he quietly. 'I could not have blamed you for your preference for Eleanor, even if you had not known and loved her before you saw my sister. Jane is too much like myself to inspire love.'

'You have no right to speak of any woman in that way, Cecil, when discussing such a subject,' observed I coldly, 'not even of your own sister.'

'Why not?' said he simply, 'when she knows it as well as I, and when nothing can give her hope, or alter what is fated. You can never be her lover, Fred; but if anything should happen to me, you must take my place as her brother, so far as you can. It has not been less painful to me, dear Fred, to broach this matter than for you to hear it spoken of. I have been cognisant of the fact for months, though you, lost in your Eleanor, may have been blind to it. One owes a woman something for her love, even if one cannot repay it in kind. Come, promise me to repay Jane, if ever it should be necessary, with your care and protection.'

'Most certainly, my dear Cecil, I will promise that,' said I: 'our common relationship, setting aside my affection for yourself, would dictate no less.'

'Thanks, Fred, thanks.' He pressed my hand, and walked on more quickly, as if relieved of some burden; my idea was then

that he was thinking of his sister's comparatively friendless condition, in case he should marry Ruth, and Jane should refuse to sanction the alliance; but perhaps he alluded to the still more complete separation of Death.

'That you do not like Jane for her own sake,' he added presently, as though in continuation of some line of thought he had been pursuing in the mean time, 'I can only too easily imagine. I believe I am the only person in the world that does; I ought to do so, for there is no sacrifice, I verily believe, which she would not make for my benefit, or for what she considers to be such.'

'You are right there,' said I, eager to join in any genuine commendation of one in whom I felt but a languid interest, and even that not of a favourable sort. 'The whole world, to Jane, seems to be comprehended in yourself. She watches you as a mother her child, or as a bride her husband,

with eyes of loving duty; and when you speak, she hangs on your words as though they were honey, and she a bee.'

'Then you think she loves me dearly?' asked Cecil, looking up with animation.

'Of course she does; who can doubt it?' asked I, surprised.

'No one, no one,' returned he. 'But you are wrong if you think she has no ambitions of her own, even beside that unhappy one of which we have been speaking, and which never can be gratified. Poor Jane, poor Jane!'

Here we turned into the avenue, and caught for the first time the gleam of the lamp in my father's study, a sight which made us quicken our pace to a rate that was incompatible with farther talk.

CHAPTER III.

JANE AND I.

THOUGH my father looked very grave when he opened the front-door for us, it was plain that he was relieved to see us. 'Good-night, Fred,' said he, in signification that I should retire, and beckoned Cecil into his study; my cousin wrung my hand as we parted, as much as to say: 'Whatever happens, I will take care that my offence shall not be any cause of breach between you and him;' and I have no doubt he did his best to exonerate me from all blame; as for himself, it was clear to me he had thoroughly made up his mind as to his own course of conduct, however it might pain him to oppose himself to my father's wishes.

As I passed by Aunt Ben's boudoir, the

door softly opened, and Cousin Jane appeared, fully dressed.

'Hush!' said she, holding up her finger, as though in fear of some exclamation of astonishment escaping me. 'Will you come in here and speak to me for a minute?'

I obeyed at once, though hardly less surprised than I had been an hour ago to find her brother sitting on Richard Waller's bench. Of course, I thought she had long retired to rest, and certainly she looked like one who was quite unfitted to be out of her bed. A ghastly pallor sat on her features, and beneath her eyes were great black rims.

'My dear Jane,' said I, really shocked by this change in her appearance, which I felt was not so much caused by bodily indisposition as by anxiety on her brother's account, 'this is no time for you to be up, I'm sure: you will make yourself downright ill.'

'What matters?' returned she scornfully. Then, in quieter tones, she added:

'I cannot rest for thinking of Cecil. That is my only ailment. You can cure it.'

'Your brother is come home,' said I, 'all right. He is now with my father in the study.'

'And the girl?' inquired she eagerly. 'Where is she?'

'The girl!' repeated I. 'Do you mean Ruth Waller?'

'Who else *should* I mean?' returned she impatiently. 'She has left the rectory: where has she gone to?'

'I believe to her own cottage.'

'Did you find her there?'

'No; I did not go to Wayford, at least not to the village. I found Cecil on the sand-cliff just above it. It was a great relief to me, as you may imagine.'

'Why?'

The question staggered me not a little. She had asked it peremptorily, like one who is really in a doubt that he wishes solved.

'Why, because it would have been such

a dreadful thing if I had not found him. If he had fled away from Gatcombe, for instance.'

'It would have been the best thing in the world,' answered she; 'that is, if they had fled together; for then he would not have married her.'

The vehemence of her manner, contrasted with the low tone in which she compelled herself to speak, was terrible; it seemed the very concentration of rage.

'You look shocked,' continued she, with contempt. 'You are thinking of her, and not of him; you have pity for her because she is pretty. I have no pity, except for him.'

'So it seems,' said I coldly.

'It *is*,' answered she fiercely. 'You men are all alike, as soft as wax, unless, indeed, when you have your own purposes to serve. Some people who are very tender are very cunning.'

There was something in her manner

which reminded me of her behaviour on the occasion of Cecil's accident; her words: 'When he is dead, you will be satisfied,' seemed once more to ring in my ears.

'I may be cunning, Jane,' said I stiffly, 'but I cannot understand you.'

'I know it,' said she, her voice changing to quite a plaintive tone. 'Don't be vexed with me, if, remembering that you had helped Cecil to this girl, I spoke in bitterness.'

'But I did not help him to her, Jane,' was my quiet reply.

'You could have hindered him if you chose, Frederick. He made you his confidant. You could have told him what she was, and what she will be. Your tongue can be sharp enough when you please.'

'But I knew nothing against Ruth's character, Jane,' pleaded I; 'and as to her position and belongings, Cecil was as well aware of them as I.'

'You knew nothing!' repeated she, with

contemptuous mimicry. 'You thought this drunken drab an angel, without doubt, as he did himself. I tell you I would rather see him dead before my eyes, than married to her. Such women should be whipped and put in the stocks.'

'For being beautiful?' said I. I spoke with bitterness, but not with any design to affront my cousin personally. My consternation, therefore, was excessive when, with a sharp and sudden cry, she hid her face in her hands, and burst into a flood of tears.

'My dear Jane,' said I soothingly, 'what is the meaning of all this? I can easily imagine that you are much annoyed with Cecil's choice. It annoys and distresses us all. But certainly there is no good to be done by vilifying the object of it. I have done my best—indeed, I have—to dissuade him from his purpose, and will continue to do so; but if you, or any one, were to speak of her as you have done to me, within his hearing, it would have the very contrary

effect to that you wish. I do not like Ruth myself; but you move me to be her defender. She is an honest girl enough in her way, and some day you will be sorry for having said such things.'

'*I* sorry?'

'Yes. For if your brother should marry her—and I honestly tell you I think he will—it will be the wisest, and indeed the only course for us all to make the best of it.'

'Your father did not say that to-night,' sobbed Jane hysterically. It was the first time that I had ever seen her in tears.

'No; because he draws, of course, the gloomiest picture of the prospect for Cecil's eyes, while it is still prospect; but much as your brother's marriage would distress him, it would not wound him so deeply as that at which you have hinted would have done, supposing Cecil had been capable of such conduct. You said I looked shocked — well, I felt shocked, that you

should wish your brother had committed a baseness.'

'Ah, you do not know what love is, Frederick, though you may think you do.'

'Nay,' said I, smiling, 'that is just what Cecil would tell *you*. In your devotion to him, it is true you would cheerfully sacrifice another; but he has sacrificed *himself*, remember.'

'Not yet, Frederick, surely not yet?' she pleaded passionately. 'Do you mean to say there is *no* hope?'

'In my opinion, very little, Jane.'

'But there is *some*,' urged she; 'I can see it in your face. You have never been cruel to me, Fred; at least not designedly. I beseech you, for mercy's sake, to tell me wherein that hope lies?'

In spite of the anger which her harshness had stirred within me, I was moved by her plaintive earnestness, which had also something of personal tenderness in it, not perhaps displeasing to my vanity.

'Well, there is just one thing, Jane, which may prevent your brother's marriage with Ruth; yet that, alas! is what none of us can desire to happen.'

'What is it?' asked Jane impatiently. 'What *can* it be except his death?'

'His dishonour, or what he fancies to be such. While this mystery still hangs over Richard Waller's death, Cecil will certainly not marry Ruth; and perhaps it may hang for ever.'

'That is just possible,' observed Jane thoughtfully: 'it is a peculiarity of such idiots as this Batty, I have heard, to adhere with obstinacy to their delusions. Let us hope it will be so in this case.'

'I must differ from you there again, Jane,' said I gravely. 'If you had heard your brother speak of the matter to-night, you would hope anything rather than that the weight of this groundless charge should not be shifted to the right shoulders. It oppresses his very soul; he is not like the

same man; nor will he ever be himself, in my opinion, while he bears it.'

'How strange,' said Jane, with a cold smile, 'that the shadow of a shadow should have such power! A drunken fellow, whose death, it seems, is a relief to everybody, is smothered in a sand-heap. A village idiot confesses that he was the cause of the accident, as he had already been of a similar mischance. Nothing appears simpler, or, I must say, more in accordance with the fitness of things. But because this natural gets it into his addled pate that a young gentleman gave him money thus to act—on a certain day, too, when it is proved that the thing could not possibly have occurred—there is all this trouble and pother!'

'Still,' said I, 'a verdict of wilful murder is a serious thing; and whoever bribed Batty to remove those props was an accessory before the fact.'

'If he *was* bribed, perhaps it may be

so; but who can suppose such a story to be true?'

'*I* do,' said I quietly; 'and what is of more consequence, Cecil does. If the blood of Richard Waller were really on his hands, he could hardly feel the matter more poignantly. It makes him shrink even from Ruth herself; and, as I have already told you, that result will be dearly purchased at the cost of his peace of mind. My hope is, however, that, at the trial next week, Batty will either withdraw his statement, or that his possession of the money may be accounted for in some other manner. In the mean time, I am most thankful on all accounts that Cecil has returned.'

'Well, you are wiser than I,' said Jane cheerfully; 'and if *you* are pleased, I suppose that *I* ought to be. I have kept you from your bed, when you were doubtless tired, and troubled you with many questions, besides inflicting on you my own views,

which are wicked, it seems, as well as mistaken. Forgive me, cousin, and good-night.'

I took her hand, which was cold and damp as usual.

'Do not fret, Jane,' said I. 'In a few days' time, your brother's mind will doubtless be set at ease, and he may then be more amenable to reason. At present, if I were you, I would venture with him neither on argument nor persuasion.'

She nodded assent; and I left her standing by the table, rigid as a statue. As I closed the door, and while the handle was still in my fingers, I heard a heavy fall. I reëntered quickly, but without noise, fully expecting to see her stretched on the floor. But she had only dropped into her seat, with her elbows on the table, and her face buried in her hands — the very image of wretchedness and despair. She was evidently quite unconscious of my presence, and I withdrew at once with precipitation. Perhaps I had misjudged Jane, after

all. Underneath that icy exterior, a heart might be beating full of sympathy, which was all the deeper, because it ran in a single channel. I could not believe that such emotion was produced by the thought of her brother's *mésalliance;* it must needs be therefore on account of the charge which had been brought against him; her endeavours to make light of it had been characteristic. She felt the disgrace and shame as bitterly as he did himself, but was too proud to own it.

At that moment I heard the study-door shut, and then voices in the hall.

'God bless you, sir!' I heard Cecil say, in broken tones, so like his sister's had been once that night, when she had shed tears, that I could have thought them to be the very same.

'And God bless *you*, my lad!' returned my father tenderly. 'A few days hence, and you will laugh at these forebodings. Come, come, Cecil; be a man.'

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT THE 'TOP' SAID.

If the progress of civilisation is to be measured, as many would have it, by the number of newspaper readers, we were not in a very advanced stage of it at Gatcombe Manor. My father, indeed, was wont to divide the world into two classes—those who believed in the newspapers, and those who did not; and I am afraid the former class were in his eyes identical with the fools, and the latter with the wise men. That excellent weekly local journal, the *Mangel Wurzel News*, without which no Conservative breakfast-table could be said to be complete upon a Saturday, was, in fact, the only newspaper we took in; and it was

therefore a great surprise to us, on the morning after the events I have just described, to find in our letter-bag the *Sandylandshire Turnip Top*, a newspaper whose circulation, in Gatcombe at least, had been hitherto confined to the rectory. It was the county Radical organ, and was supposed to advocate 'advanced opinions;' the difference between it and its rival consisting, however, mainly in the fact, that the former was in favour of the parvenu gentry of the neighbourhood, and the latter of the old county families. The *Top* (as it was irreverently termed by its opponents) was always asking, for instance, how long the infamous hereditary principle was to exclude such a man as John Bourne of Gatcombe from the list of deputy-lieutenants for Sandylandshire. For the Alchemist had money in every good investment that offered, and the *Top* was a very thriving concern. My father, who was no more a Tory than he was an ichthyosaurus, used

to chuckle over this particular grievance, and to aver that it caused him to have a better opinion of the 'hereditary principle' than any argument he had seen advanced in its favour; but Aunt Ben, who was *Mangel Wurzel* (or True Blue) to the backbone, would have had the *Top* burned in the market-place by the common hangman, if market-places and common hangmen had been articles on hand.

'Why, good gracious, Frederick, here's the *Top!*' cried she in horror, taking the unclean thing from the letter-bag, and holding it between her finger and thumb. 'Who could have sent it to us? Pah, pah! it should be thrown into the kitchen fire.'

'Let it be fumigated,' said my father gravely, 'but not burned. It may perhaps have an account of our theatricals in it, and a criticism upon *Ivanhoe*.'

'Not *it*,' said Aunt Ben scornfully; 'and besides, that would have been in last week's paper, if at all.'

But the idea of being in print, even in the *Top*, fired all my soul, and I snatched at the paper with trembling fingers, and put it in my pocket. A natural instinct suggested an adverse verdict, and I did not wish to let the public mark my agonies while the barb worked in my soul. It is said that one of the most trying experiences in connection with a literary career is one's first review—the first notice taken in a public print of one's novel or poem; but I am inclined to think that the ordeal is even still more severe in the case of a dramatic aspirant; for he who writes a drama, writes for the public only, and cannot comfort himself with the fond delusion that if a failure on the stage, his work will be perused by private persons. In the case of a novel, if the critics (confound them!) do band themselves together to decry it, there is still an appeal to Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Brown: whatever its artistic shortcoming, it may still have its attractions, and

secure success in despite of the hebdomadal arbiters of fame; but when a play is condemned upon the boards, it is not only hopeless to imagine that it will be read in the closet, but no advantage even if it is. I felt that if *Ivanhoe* was damned in the *Top*, the term would have all the significance that it has in theology.

I had fortunately eaten my breakfast, for otherwise a piece of toast would have now choked me, and at once retired to my own room. Then I took the newspaper out, and looked at it still folded; gazed forebodingly at its frontispiece, the Banner of Freedom, which protruded itself on either side of the wrapper, and felt as though Fame, Fortune, Fate—my Future, in fact, whether for good or ill—were all inscribed within that (sixpenny) roll. The idea, of course, was absurd, the position ludicrous; but it was no joke to me. And looking back upon that incident after the experience of a lifetime, I must allow there was

at least as much cause for gravity as in many another juncture of affairs which has hinged on an equally imaginary pivot. It is not the most grave matters that concern us the most seriously, but those which most nearly affect our *amour propre*.

The *Mangel Wurzel News* in its last week's issue had informed its readers, under the unpromising head of 'Miscellaneous,' that 'At Gatcombe Manor, the seat of Frederick Wray, Esq., a dramatic entertainment, at which Lady Repton (once the famous *tragédienne* of the London boards) had kindly assisted, had been given to the tenantry of the estate;' surely a most unsatisfactory and insufficient notice of that great event; and if the *Turnip Top* should now show itself alive to the future interests of the British drama, I was quite prepared to discard a foolish prejudice, and take the editor —and his principles, too, if necessary—to my beating heart. How it did beat, and how sick I felt, it is quite impossible to de-

pict in words. And all the time the *Top* contained not one single syllable about the matter. But I anticipate.

While I still turned over the fateful journal in my hands, entered Cousin Cecil, smiling. 'Well, Fred, what does it say? What! have you not opened it?'

'No,' said I. 'Don't laugh at me, please; but open it yourself, and tell me.'

'My *dear* Fred,' returned he, in a tone of remonstrance (but then it was not *his* play), 'why, what *does* it matter?'

He sat down, crossing his legs unconcernedly, and tore the paper open with irreverent fingers.

'Under what head will it be, Fred?—"The Drama"? or "Gatcombe"? or "Accidents and Offences"? Eh? I don't see a word about it.' Suddenly his roving eyes were arrested, and an expression of intense interest came over his features.

'Have you found it, Cecil? Don't read it to yourself. Pray, let me hear it' (for I

saw it was no good news). 'Whatever it is, I can bear it from your lips.'

'Listen, then,' answered my cousin, with a mocking laugh that made my blood freeze. 'It is not a paragraph that I am about to read you, but a leading article—the first in the paper; the one that everybody must needs read. Some kind friend has, however, marked it with two crosses, so that we should not miss it.'

'Beast!' observed I parenthetically. 'But what is it called?'

'"*Gross Miscarriage of Justice.*—It is our painful duty to comment upon certain proceedings before the magistrates' bench at Holksham, a detailed account of which will be found in another portion of our paper. They illustrate so completely the evils attendant upon that system of subservience to the lords of the soil which it has always been our proudest mission to expose, that we cannot forbear to dwell upon them, unwilling as we are to wound the feelings of

a family, which, notwithstanding it has already contained one notable *mauvais sujet*"' ['That is my father, I suppose,' interpolated Cecil bitterly], '"has been hitherto widely respected. It would be affectation to conceal the name; we refer to the Wrays of Gatcombe. A coroner's jury brought in last week a verdict of Wilful Murder against some person or persons unknown. The next day, one of the culprits gave himself up to justice, and yesterday repeated in open court the confession which he had already made, somewhat informally, as it appears, to the constable who arrested him. So far the case seems clear; nor would there, we apprehend, have been the slightest difficulty in the matter, but for the social position of *another person* implicated in the prisoner's statement. True, it is averred that the culprit in custody is of weak intellect; but even if it be so, it is hard to see how his words should be permitted to weigh against himself, and yet lose their force

when directed against his (alleged) accomplice. He charges Mr. Cecil Wray of Gatcombe (son of the late Thomas Wray, of whose conduct the Liberal party had such bitter cause to complain at the time when this county first threw off the yoke of Tory servitude) with direct participation in the crime of which he confesses himself to be guilty; declares that he was bribed by him to steal the props, the removal of which caused the sand-pit to fall in upon Richard Waller, and produces the very gold which (as he alleges) was paid him for that purpose. Far be it from us to press harder on this young gentleman than the case demands; let us be careful to add that in one particular, the date, Mr. Cecil Wray was able to disprove this statement. But with that exception, it must surely be admitted that the case is a strong one—far too strong to be readily discarded from the minds of honest men, even though summarily dismissed by the county magnates sitting in

judgment at Holksham — one of whom, shameful to narrate, was no other than the uncle of the young gentleman thus implicated. We put it to our readers, whether, if Bill Styles or Thomas Noakes had been the persons pointed out as his accomplices by the unhappy prisoner at the bar, *they* would have been suffered to leave the court, not without a stain, indeed (for the stain of blood will remain where it has been indicated till this matter has undergone a thorough investigation), but without measures being taken to insure their subsequent attendance if required. One voice, indeed, that of Mr. Bourne of Gatcombe, was raised from the bench itself on behalf of even-handed justice; but it was overborne; the principle of family influence triumphed, and Mr. Cecil Wray is still at large. Of course, it is possible that he may abide at home, in readiness to meet the renewal of this grave charge at the assizes, or elsewhere. But it would be a dereliction of our public duty

not to point out that he may also remove himself from the jurisdiction of the law, if he so pleases; and also to remind our readers that it would not be the first time that a member of the proud race of Wray has similarly eluded justice.'

'What does this man mean by that?' inquired Cecil sternly.

He saw I hesitated.

'For Heaven's sake, tell me, Fred. There is nothing left me now to hear which can make life more bitter.'

'It is, I suppose,' said I, 'a cruel and exaggerated reference to some election trouble with which your father was concerned. All this is mere venom, my dear Cecil, which has doubtless been rankling in this blackguard's mind for years. Perhaps my uncle horsewhipped him twenty years ago; and I'll do it again myself before he is three days older.'

'No, no,' said Cecil sadly. 'You can never horsewhip *this* away, dear Fred;'

then suddenly casting down the paper: 'Great Heaven!' cried he despondingly, 'what have I done to have earned punishment such as this!'

'Dear Cecil,' said I, 'don't give way thus. What *does* it matter (as you yourself just said to me) if a toad-like thing, such as the *Top*, *does* spit its venom? No one who knows you, or it, will be affected by such rubbish. And besides, as I heard my father say to you last night, a few days hence, and, in all probability, the truth will be known, and we shall laugh at all these slanders.'

'I feel as if I should never laugh again,' groaned Cecil. 'Hush!' He started to his feet, then added hastily, 'That is your father's step. Put away the paper, lest his noble heart should suffer hurt from that base weapon.'

However stricken and past farther harm poor Cecil felt, as far he was himself concerned, he could still feel for others.

'Well, Fred, what does the critic of the *Top* say?' inquired my father cheerily. 'To judge from your looks, the infidel dog has damned your *Ivanhoe.*'

It was touching in him (knowing, as I did, how he despised such matters) to have come to inquire how the paper had handled my poor play.

'They have not mentioned it at all, sir,' said I ruefully enough.

'Tut, tut! That *is* bad, Fred. Still they might have abused it (for the *Top* does not love our family); and not to be famous is better, after all, than to be infamous; is it not, Cecil?'

This unlucky question, and its direct appeal, was too much for my unhappy cousin; he strove to reply, but could not, then burst into tears.

'It is Cecil who has been wounded by what the paper says, and all of us through him,' said I, in answer to my father's inquiring look. 'There is a scandalous arti-

cle against the Wrays, founded upon Batty's statement before the bench. I think you had better not read it, sir.'

'My dear Fred,' said my father with a look of quiet scorn, 'have you known me all these years to such little purpose as to suppose anything written in a newspaper could move *me!* Let me read what this able editor has written about us. *He* sees the necessity of his living, remember, though it may not impress us with the same force.'

'Don't read it, sir, O, pray, don't read it!' pleaded Cecil passionately; 'nobody who reads it can ever think well of me again.'

The hand which Cecil warningly interposed, my father took, and tenderly retained throughout the perusal of the article; when he had read it, he quietly ejaculated, 'Hang him, Rook!' which was his favourite quotation when annoyed with any one, and put the paper into his pocket. 'What does Suckling say about such fellows?' murmured he, musing.

'"Thou vermin Slander, bred in abject mind
Of thoughts impure, by vile tongues animate,
Canker of our prized Freedom, couldst thou find
Naught but our love whereon to show thy hate?"

This strikes through you **at us**, my lad, else we should **not feel** it; and what you suffer, remember, is the measure of our hurt; so, for our sakes, wear a bold front. Neither your sister nor your Aunt Ben must read this rubbish. Light a match, and burn it, Fred.'

Then laying his broad palm on Cecil's head, just as though he had been a child, and patting it encouragingly, my father left the room, wounded, as I believe, to the very quick; for his philosophy was reserved for his own affairs: in what concerned those who were dear to him—whether dead or alive—he was only too sensitive.

CHAPTER V.

BATTY MAKES NO SIGN.

THE pleasure of inflicting pain on others, even though they be not our enemies, is not unhappily confined to the breast of the British schoolboy. It exists more or less in all low human natures, though (with the doubtful exception of the kitten who has caught a mouse) not, I believe, among the brutes. To whose good offices we were indebted for that copy of the *Turnip Top*, we never knew, but several kind female friends were good enough that very day to call and condole with Aunt Ben upon its 'abominable' contents. They were distressed above measure at the disgraceful attack upon her respected family; and while confessing that the insult was beneath contempt, very solicitous that 'something should be done.'

'Perhaps you had better make your kind suggestion to my brother,' was Aunt Ben's grim reply, at which these well-meaning ladies gathered up their skirts and retired precipitately. If my aunt suffered, she did so, like the North American Indian at the stake, without moving a muscle.

'I always told you, Fred, what the *Turnip Top* was like,' observed she calmly.

Nor, strange to say, did Cousin Jane give any outward sign of exasperation, beyond the recommendation of her usual panacea for all offenders. 'He ought to be whipped,' said she through her shut lips.

'What! the *Top?*' returned my father, smiling. 'Well, that seems very appropriate.'

'No, the editor,' answered Cousin Jane.

'My dear, if the paper had been burned, as I have always advised,' said Aunt Ben gravely, 'in some public place, by the common— But hush! here comes your brother.'

By tacit consent, not a word was said

about the matter in Cecil's presence. It was idle to expect him to forget it—indeed, it was plain to all of us that he thought of nothing else; but we strove to persuade him that we ourselves made light of it. Those days that succeeded the magistrates' meeting at Holksham were very sad ones, their darkness relieved only by a sort of lurid expectation derived from the coming trial. What disclosure would it bring about? What course would Batty's scanty wits induce him to take? Would he persist in his present story, and above all, would his possession of the gold be, by any other means than it, accounted for? If that could be done, his curious hallucination as respected Cecil must needs be taken by everybody—even by the editor of the *Top*—for what it was really worth. In the mean time, Cecil kept at home, shrinking from every eye.

The Rector called again, with the intention, as before, of expressing to him the kindly feelings by which he was personally

animated towards him, and of disavowing all participation with his father's conduct on the bench. But, to the regret of us all (save one), Cecil refused to see him; not, as I honestly believe, through anger, but because he really felt unequal to the interview. His nerves were shaken to the centre, and he might well decline to listen to any allusion to the cause; and, moreover, perhaps he dreaded that Mr. Bourne, in his injudicious zeal, might even have something to say upon another subject, quite as delicate, and just now hardly less painful.

The exception I have referred to was Cousin Jane. She expressed her conviction that Cecil was quite justified in his objection to hold any communication with the rectory people—a condemnation sweeping enough, and which was made so, as I well understood, in order to include Eleanor.

The longest days drag themselves out somehow, and that preceding the assize at Monkton came round at last. My father

had engaged lodgings in the city for Cecil, himself, and me, and we were to drive thither early in the morning. Dinner—a meal now almost untouched—was over; it was a beautiful evening, but Cecil had retired as usual to his own room, while Aunt Ben and Jane had taken their work out into the stone verandah that ran round the front of the Manor-house, and my father had joined them with his book. I was lying on the grass in front of them, elaborating a dramatic plot, into which the incident of stealing props from a sand-pit would perpetually intrude, like King Charles I. into Mr. Dick's memorial, when my eye caught the flutter of a white dress in the winding avenue. I rose in quite a leisurely manner, and walked into the house through the opened drawing-room window.

'He's got an idea,' observed my father, 'and is going to write it down;' and called out to me, 'Are you sure it's your own, Fred?'

'I believe so, sir,' said I demurely; then, once out of their sight, ran round to the front door, and met my Eleanor. She was pale, notwithstanding that she had also been running; and I knew by her sweet eyes that she was the bearer of some serious intelligence. 'What is it,' said I, 'my darling; for I see you have brought news?'

'I have,' answered she, almost breathless.

'Don't be in a hurry,' said I. 'Take time, and refresh yourself' (here we interchanged the refreshment of a kiss). 'It must be good news to *me*, at all events, since it brings *you* here.'

'I hardly know whether it is good or bad,' replied she; 'it's'—here she looked up quickly at an upper window; it was my cousin's, and there he stood, waving his hand, and trying to smile in his old fashion — 'O, good gracious! why, he must have seen us,' whispered Nelly in great confusion.

'Never mind, my darling,' said I assuringly. 'If he did, it only reminded him of somebody else's kisses; and even the recollection must be welcome to him, poor fellow, in his present trouble.'

'Ah, yes; it is about that that I am come, Fred. I was not told to do so, and perhaps I ought not; but I could not bear that you should be kept in suspense an hour longer than was necessary. News has just arrived from Monkton—terrible news; and yet, though it is so shocking, perhaps it will put an end to all this dreadful trouble. Poor Batty has committed suicide—hanged himself in his cell.'

'Good Heavens! are you quite sure that this is true?' I had no doubt that it was so; but asked the question mechanically, in order to give time for my own thoughts to work. Was this catastrophe for Cecil's advantage or not? On the one hand, it would quash farther proceedings; on the other hand, it would leave the question of Batty's

having had a confederate a mystery more impenetrable than ever.

'O yes, it's true,' said Nelly. 'The village constable himself, who had just returned from Monkton, whither he went this morning, to be in readiness for the trial to-morrow, brought word of it to grandpapa;' and here a blush betrayed that she was not ignorant of the reason which scandal at least had suggested for old Mr. Bourne's interest in Batty's fate.

'Let us come and tell my father,' said I gravely; 'they are all in the verandah. Did you hear any cause assigned for the poor creature's putting an end to himself?'

'He had pined and fretted ever since he was committed to jail. Having always lived in the open air, he could not endure the confinement, it seems; at least there was no other reason given.'

Here we rounded the corner of the house, and came in sight of the party I had just left. Jane rose at once, as if to go indoors;

but I called out to her that Nelly had brought news about the trial, and she stopped at once, like one changed to stone, with a foot upon the window-sill, and her hand pressed to her breast.

'Good Heavens! what is it?' cried Aunt Ben. 'Have they found the man who bribed poor Batty?' For my aunt, who, of all of us, knew Batty best, by reason of her ministrations in the village, had not a doubt that his tale was so far true.

'If they have found *him*,' said Jane sarcastically, 'they must be very clever. It is much more likely that they have discovered Batty to be more knave than fool.'

'He is dead!' said Eleanor simply. 'He hanged himself this morning in his cell in Monkton jail.'

'The Lord have mercy on him!' ejaculated Aunt Ben; 'and I think He will, for I don't believe the poor soul meant harm. Indeed, his leaving life in that way shows him to have been mad.'

'Or guilty,' said Jane coldly. 'Indeed, we know as much as that already. Well, I confess, for my part, I am very glad;' and she looked so.

'O, Jane!' said my aunt reprovingly; 'we should surely never rejoice in a fellow-creature's death.'

'Fellow-creature! Why, even according to your own showing, Aunt Ben, he was an idiot.'

'Hush, hush!' said my father quietly. 'It has been categorically proved of late that the intellectual difference between idiots and persons of average ability is not so great as that between Shakespeare and the same persons; so let us avoid all narrow views of human fellow-creatureship.'

'Did poor Batty die without farther sign, Eleanor? I mean, is it said that he made any communication as respected this unhappy charge?'

This was a question which, of course, went home to us all; yet Jane, whom one

would have expected, on her brother's account, to be the most concerned, seemed the most indifferent to it. Instead of showing the hushed anxiety of 'hand and eye,' that manifested itself in Aunt Ben, my cousin stepped within the drawing-room as Eleanor was about to speak, and there remained, in shadow, only just so long as sufficed to hear her reply.

'Batty is said to have remained obstinately silent ever since his committal,' was the answer. 'It was with difficulty they could even persuade him to take his meals.'

There was an awkward silence, during which the closing of the drawing-room door informed us that my cousin had withdrawn into the house.

'It is strange how lightly Jane has always treated a matter that has so deeply affected her brother,' observed Aunt Ben. 'But I suppose this sad end of poor Batty, and his silence, rather bears out her view that the unhappy lad was even more witless

than we imagined, and his statement mere wild and wandering talk—Don't you think so, Frederick?'

'So far as his words went,' answered my father doubtfully, 'that would be so, supposing they were unsupported by any other evidence; but there is still his possession of the money to be accounted for, and I confess it puzzles me. It is too large a sum not to be missed if he had stolen it from any of our neighbours. If the gold had changed to dry leaves, as in the Arabian tale, it would only seem in accordance with so strange and weird a story; but there it is still, a solid fact.'

'But you don't surely think that this matter will still continue to be a trouble to us?' inquired Aunt Ben disconsolately. 'I am sure poor dear Cecil has fretted himself about it more than enough already. It is my belief that it is having a serious effect upon his health.'

'Yes; he will need change,' said my fa-

ther thoughtfully: 'a thorough change will be good for him on all accounts.'

'You are not thinking of sending the boy away from home?' cried my aunt in alarm, for she was much attached to Cecil. 'Well, I do really agree with Jane, that that is making far too much of the matter. I did hope, after what has just happened, that there would be an end of it for good and all.'

'I am afraid not,' said my father seriously; 'for the fact is, it is only natural that the sudden end of this poor creature should give his statement a greater force than it had when he was alive. I had great hopes that to-morrow's trial would have somehow elucidated the truth; whereas now—though I would not for the world that Cecil should hear me say it—the matter is more mysterious and grave than ever, since all is left to be proved and *dis*proved.'

'You are right, sir,' said a piteous voice, that sent a thrill through us all; and there

stood Cecil immediately before us—whose approaching footsteps on the grass had made no sound. It was easy to read in his pale and haggard face that he had heard my father's words, and that they had come upon him like the words of doom. 'You are quite right, sir,' repeated he. 'God help me!'

CHAPTER VI.

GOOD-BYE BY PROXY.

With Batty died Batty's secret; or rather, the key of the mystery, which the poor fellow himself knew not how to use, was buried with him. In spite of all our pains, and my father spared neither his purse nor his trouble in the investigation, the village idiot's possession of those golden coins remained unaccounted for; while, of course, his own explanation of it, disproved though it had been in one important particular, lived and throve in men's minds, like an ill weed, wherever the soil was rank. My unhappy cousin did not tarry with us to see its full growth; and, notwithstanding we foresaw that his sudden departure must needs foster it, we were glad that he readily fell in with my father's proposition, that he

should leave Gatcombe, and travel with his sister. The suggestion was made to him on the very evening on which the news arrived of Batty's decease, for Cecil was thrown by it into such a state of nervous depression, that it aroused our fears for his reason. It seemed to me—for youth imagines all passions to be enduring—that he would never smile again. He was, however, perfectly collected in his words and manner, and asked of me, next morning, a certain favour, with the air of one upon his deathbed, who demands a last service of his friend.

'So soon as I am gone,' said he, 'dear Fred, take this to Ruth;' and he gave me a small packet. 'Be very gentle with her, for my sake. I shall never see her more, I know.'

'But, indeed, I hope you will,' said I, most honestly, for in our great trouble about his health and mind, the old regret for his attachment to the girl had almost faded away. 'When we see you next, you will

be your old self again, and this foul slander slain.'

'Yes, it must be slain,' said he thoughtfully. 'It will never die out; and while it lives, Fred, *my* life is not worth the having. Tell her I said *that*. I can trust you to tell her all, I know. Tell her that I love her now more dearly than ever, though I am about to put half the world between us.' [He was going to South America.] 'She will not stay here, perhaps; but if she needs aught at any time, I have told her to write to you. I remember how those last words of the Merry King were wont to touch you: "Don't let poor Nelly starve." Well, Ruth is more to me than Nelly was to him a thousand times, and I am more to you than the brother to whom he made appeal. You will see to this?'

'Of course, dear Cecil,' assented I. 'Can I do anything more for you?'

'No, Fred; there is nothing more to *do;* but try, when we are gone, to think a little

kindlier of Jane. She is leaving, for my sake, a happy home, and the person she loves best in the world, though to no purpose.'

I felt confused, as I well might, and stammered out some commonplace about one who was dear to him being always dear to us; but, 'I don't mean *that*,' he said. 'You are all angry with her—you especially, I know—about this very matter that is driving me away. She does not take it enough to heart, you think, since it has crushed me; she is glad that Batty is dead, and was not greatly grieved at Waller's death. Well, all that is not her fault. Her sympathies are very strong, but they are narrow. She loves only a few people in the world; the rest are naught to her; but we whom she does love should pardon her. She would have me treat this dreadful charge with indifference, and is impatient at what she deems my weakness. I sometimes think that she should have been the

brother, and I the sister. But she loves me dearly, notwithstanding, Fred, and let that move your heart towards her, though it moves you nothing that she loves yourself. We are almost one, Fred, Jane and I.'

The tender earnestness of his tone was indescribable; in his anxiety that his sister should possess our good-will, it was easy to see that he had, for the moment, forgotten his own sorrows. I promised him all I could, and then, at his own desire, departed to do his errand at Wayford. He wished to hear tidings of Ruth from my own lips before he left Gatcombe; but his resolution not to see her again, so long as a shade of suspicion attached to him of having had a share in her brother's death, was unalterable.

Accordingly, I went to Wayford, where Ruth was now residing quite alone, in the old cottage by the river. I had not seen her for many weeks, except on the occasion when she was carried forth half dead from

the mouth of the sand-pit; and the change in her appearance for the better struck me as quite marvellous. She was sad and depressed, of course, and her melancholy became her, as it becomes all beauties who are somewhat lacking in refinement of expression. She was, it is true, attired far more tastefully than usual in a black silk dress, with a little white collar, the shape of which I recognised at once—and indeed her whole costume was the gift of Eleanor; but her tone and manner were also no longer what they had been; their roughness had been smoothed away; while the provincialism of her very speech, though still noticeable, was so sublimed that it seemed rather an attractive eccentricity than the coarse burr it had been. Sorrow, I knew, was said to be a great refiner, but such a change as this was beyond Sorrow's power to have effected; and Love, I knew, was even a greater magician. But *was* this girl in love? I doubted it, as well I might,

for had not Cecil himself confessed his doubt? If this change was due to mere culture, derived from association with him, how often must he have seen her, what pains must he have taken with her, and how apt a pupil must she have shown herself to be! This elucidation of the mystery was possible, for although Cecil's own nature was under no obligation to letters for its sensitiveness and delicacy, he was fully alive to their civilising influence.

Ruth received me with a little flush of surprise, but with perfect self-possession. It was very kind of 'Master Fred' to come and see her, considering what things she knew had been said against her, and in what ill-favour she was held at the Manor-house. That was only natural, she owned, but yet it was not her fault.

To this I readily assented; nor could I help adding a little compliment upon the marvellous beauty which alone was to blame in the matter.

'Mr. Cecil says that I am beautiful,' sighed she, 'so I suppose it must be true; but it would be better, it seems, for poor girls to be born plain.'

There was a bitterness in her tone which led me to avoid discussion upon this subject, and I at once entered upon the business on which I had come.

She opened the packet in my presence; it contained a long letter, and what seemed quite a little fortune in bank-notes. The latter she showed me with a quiet smile. 'Your cousin is very generous,' said she. 'Will you think ill of me for accepting such a sum?'

'Far from it,' said I. 'In my opinion, it is his duty to provide for you in his absence; and since the duration of it is indefinite, it was necessary to make an ample provision. When that is gone, he bade me say—what I am very glad to repeat—that you have only to apply to me, Rue.'

She shook her head, with a grateful but

sad smile. 'No, Master Fred. This will be more than sufficient for me, until the time comes when I shall make my own living.'

'Well, well, let us hope so, Ruth. But, remember, you are now alone in the world, without poor Richard to work for you.'

She turned quite white at this mention of her brother, and sat down. She had hitherto been standing, out of mechanical respect, perhaps, for a visitor from the Manor-house, for, though she called me Master Fred, she was never otherwise familiar.

'Don't speak of Richard,' said she. 'Though he was near his end, and could never have seen another summer, I would give ten times this sum, if I had it, to see him sitting yonder in his old place in the chimney-corner. And yet, again, sometimes at night here,' she added, with a shudder 'when I seem to hear him coughing in his room, that terrifies me.'

'You must not live here, alone, Ruth, any longer,' returned I. 'It is bad for you

to do so, and now you are so rich, there will be no occasion. You can easily get some old school-friend out of the village to come and stay with you.'

'O no,' said she thoughtfully; 'I shall not stay at Gatcombe now. I shall leave this at once.'

'Not for a day or two, I hope,' said I, 'since Cecil goes to-morrow.'

'I understand,' said she, blushing deeply. 'Gatcombe folk would say that I had gone with him.'

'They say anything but their prayers, as Aunt Ben says, Ruth, so indeed it is but too likely,'

'Yes; if they do not spare Mr. Cecil, but credit even him—at least some of them do—with having killed poor Richard, what would they not say of *me?* Not that I care, Master Fred, one pin for such as they,' she added vehemently; 'but there is Mr. Cecil himself to be considered.'

'Well, he has certainly enough to bear

of slander, as it is, Ruth. What is your opinion of poor Batty's wild story?'

'Don't ask me, Master Fred. I cannot bear to think about it; for when I do so, there comes into my mind a story that I have read about the devil assuming a human form in order to work evil: suppose he really did take your cousin's shape—and surely that is not more unlikely than that Mr. Cecil himself should have done that of which he is accused.'

'That is true,' said I, smiling; 'still, I don't think it *was* the devil. In what book did you find so weird a story?'

'In one of these,' said she, throwing open the cupboard of the dresser, in which was piled quite a little library. 'Mr. Cecil has given me all those books; perhaps you will amuse yourself with them for a little, while I read his letter and reply to it.'

If she had been a lady in Mayfair, in place of a cottar's daughter, she could not have made this suggestion with more *sang-*

froid and as a matter of course; whereas, six months ago, to offer a chair and a glass of milk would have embarrassed her, besides exhausting her whole resources of entertainment. The secret of this transformation lay partly, as I now found out, in the books themselves, the majority of which were modern dramas. Ruth had studied life, as it were, from the lay-figure, which, if not so good as the living model, can do wonders for an artist of imagination; and I began to comprehend that allusion of Cecil's to Ruth's dramatic talents which had so excited my surprise.

'And have you read all these books, Rue?' inquired I, forgetting, in my astonishment, that I was interrupting her in the act of literary composition. As it happened, she did not hear me, being exceedingly engrossed with her occupation, the mechanical difficulties of which were obviously very great. With head aslant, she sat at the deal table pursuing every up-stroke of the

pen with a grave movement of her head, and every down-stroke with a severe pursing of her 'cupidon' lips.

What a charming 'secretary,' or confidential page, thought I, would she make upon the boards, and what a credit she would be to a play, if she could only act the part as well as she looked it! I watched her in silence till her task was done, and she was folding up the letter, and then reiterated my question.

'Have you read all the books, Rue, in this cupboard?'

'The story-books? Yes, all, Master Fred.'

'And the plays?'

'O, the plays I have learned almost by heart,' answered she simply. 'Mr. Cecil wished me to learn the words that the heroine has to speak in each, and I found it just as easy to learn the rest. One likes to know what is said to one, you know, as well as what one has to say one's self.'

'Quite right,' said I; 'though Lady Repton used to compare the conscientiousness of that course of conduct with that of the gentleman who blacked himself all over to perform Othello. So you used to recite to Cecil, did you, from these plays?'

'He wished it,' said she, not apologetically, but as one who gives an all-sufficient reason.

'But it gave you pleasure for its own sake, did it not, Rue?'

'I am not sure,' answered she doubtfully. 'When I did well, I liked it, because I saw that I had pleased him; but when I forgot my part, or spoke it ill, I was very sorry.'

'But how strange that he should have set you such a task at all!' mused I, more to myself than interrogatively. 'Though, to be sure, he is very fond of plays.'

'I think Mr. Cecil thought it was the quickest way of making me a little more like a lady,' was Ruth's unaffected reply.

If such was his object,' said I gallantly, 'I am sure that your diligence has been well rewarded. The process has been most successful, I do assure you, and I have been wondering ever since I came here how its effect had been produced.'

'No: have you really?' said she, her face lighting up with pleasure. 'I am so glad to think that all his pains have not been thrown away.'

'On the contrary, Rue, they have borne magic fruit; and besides, what an advantage you will find it, now that you are likely to be alone for a time, to have acquired a taste for reading! If you want more books, you have only to let me know, for we have plenty of them up at the Manor-house.'

'Play-books?' inquired Ruth eagerly. 'I mean like these.'

'Well, no: there are plenty of plays, but they are all old ones, I am afraid, and such as—considering the object you have

in view—will do you more harm than good. I will look out, however, such as I think likely to suit you, and you shall have them to-morrow.'

Her eager face darkened at the word, which it was plain reminded her of Cecil's abrupt departure and doubtful return.

'Thank you, Master Fred,' sighed she. 'Tell him—tell Mr. Cecil for me, that I will lay all he has said to heart, and do my best to please him. I will do that even if he never comes back, he may be sure.'

'O, but he will come back, and very soon, I hope,' said I cheerfully. 'This mystery about your brother's death shall be cleared up, my father says, at whatever cost; and even if it be not, my cousin will think less seriously of this foolish slander some day, or find himself unable to keep away from you. I'm sure, if I were he, I should find it very difficult myself.'

This little compliment, which had more truth in it than I should have thought pos-

sible previous to this interview, and which I paid in my best manner, was utterly thrown away.

'No, no,' answered she sadly; 'he will never come home again, nor back to England, until all is made clear. He says so here, and he has sworn it to me before.'

There was more disappointment, as I fancied, in her tone, than distress, or, still less, despair. Yet it was plain that she entertained but very slight hope of his return at all. The conclusion I arrived at, on the whole, was so far consonant with my first impressions of the matter, that I did not think the girl was what is called 'in love' with Cecil; but she was evidently attached to him by the bond of deep respect, and also by that of gratitude. She reminded me of some young girl, who, wooed by an old man to whom she owes all she has in the world, would love him if she could, and endeavours to do so, but only with partial success.

'You will give this letter to Mr. Cecil,' were her last words, spoken with feeling, but without any passionate emotion, 'with my loving duty; and tell him I shall be patient, and never, never can forget him.'

If she had really loved him, was it possible that the sense of inferiority of her own position could be still so keen as to compel her to call him 'Mr. Cecil'? I thought not.

The next day Cecil departed. The leave-taking between us was a very sad one; more so, I do believe, even on his side, because of the act of separation, than by reason of its cause. For he and I were dear to one another as brothers; nay, dearer, for we had never experienced those fraternal quarrels, which are not always the renewals of love, nor used that excessive frankness too often peculiar to fraternity, which makes it and friendship such different things. Some excuse was afforded, by the painful circumstances under which he departed, for the

contrast between the farewells of the household in his own case and in that of his sister; but even as it was, I felt pained on her account. It was evident she did not leave a single friend behind her. I threw into my own adieu, therefore, from compassion, a warmth which was not wholly genuine; and she held my hand, in a long, lingering clasp, that seemed to thank me for the effort. The rector and Eleanor had taken leave of my cousins on the previous evening, but the latter came down at the moment of their departure to repeat her good wishes. She offered her cheek to Cecil, which he kissed with a grateful blush; but when she would have embraced his sister, Jane drew back, and held out her gloved hand.

'We shall see you soon again, I trust, dear Cecil,' said I.

'I trust so too, Fred. But not here,' he added in a low voice. 'I shall never see Gatcombe more. You will write to me

about your dear selves, and—and—Ruth. No money will be spared, your father has promised me, to remove the fatal barrier that—'

'My dear Cecil, we shall be late for the train,' interrupted Jane, in her sharp decisive tones.

I drew back from the wheels; the horses started; and Cecil's sentence remained unfinished. I knew, of course, what he would have said; but, doubtless, Jane imagined that he was leaving some message for Ruth Waller. Her countenance darkened; her colour deepened, as was her way when angry; the last look I saw upon her face was a frown.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH MY FATHER INCURS THE CONTEMPT OF ALL SENSIBLE PEOPLE.

My forebodings as to the melancholy that would fall on Gatcombe after Cecil's departure were more than fulfilled. Before his coming, I had been well content, since friendship was unknown to me; but having known it, there was now a void in my life which nothing could fill. Eleanor, indeed, was left; but I seldom saw her, for she was forbidden to visit the Manor-house by old Mr. Bourne, whose wish was law to his son, though he obeyed it unwillingly; while the rectory doors were, of course, closed against myself. The home of my youth had lost its joys for me:

'From end to end
Of all the landscape underneath
I found no place that did not breathe
Some gracious memory of my friend.'

So vexed was I with all that had contributed to his departure, that my heart was once more steeled against Ruth; and instead of taking her the promised books at once, I delayed doing so for ten days; and when I did visit Wayford, she had left the village, no one knew whither, unless indeed Cecil knew. This, however, could scarcely be the case, since under cover to me he addressed a letter to her—written at sea—which I was of course unable to deliver. The tone of his epistle to myself was very tender; he called to mind our years of companionship, unsullied by dispute; our common occupations and pursuits; the homely joys he should never share again; and bared his whole loyal heart.

'When your first play comes out, dear Fred, I will come and see it from the antipodes itself, if I be there. Don't give way

to despondency. [This was in allusion to a letter I had sent him to Liverpool, and which he received the day he sailed.] *You will see my face again, Fred, never fear.* In the mean time, the play, "the play's the thing." Your Eleanor shall see you famous, and blushing before the footlights; I predict it. Tell her I feel the kiss she gave me still burning on my cheek; and give her one for me.'

There was little allusion to himself. He wrote with characteristic unselfishness, about my own affairs. 'Your father, I am sure, will let you take your own way about the stage. It is what you are born for; and he, on his part, only lives for you. God bless you both.'

'May I see Cecil's letter?' said my father; and, of course, I placed it in his hand, though not without misgivings. He read it, looked grave, and returned it to me without a word. It was not surprising, I thought, that its reference to my writing plays, as a

profession, should be unwelcome to him. It seemed, however, that he had another cause for gravity; for he mentioned to Aunt Ben, before he left the breakfast-table, that he feared we were going to have fever in the village. 'Both the Stoddarts are down with something, which Cherwell' (the doctor) 'does not like the look of.'

'Indeed? I will go and see them,' said Aunt Ben quickly.

'If you think it right,' was my father's quiet rejoinder, 'do so—but there is no occasion for *you*, Fred, to go into the village just at present.'

'Very good, sir,' said I carelessly, for youth is selfishly indifferent to such matters, and I was thinking of Cecil's letter.—'The cottage is Mr. Bourne's property, is it not?'

'Yes; and if it *is* fever, he has, I fear, himself to blame for it. His cottages are the worst drained in the place; and notwithstanding that his son has represented

to him the wrong he thus inflicts on the community, he will apply no remedy.'

'He is a wicked old wretch,' observed Aunt Ben with cheerful alacrity. 'Nothing, I believe, is sacred with him—not even human life itself.'

'*Auri sacra fames*—he has the divine hunger,' rejoined my father apologetically.

'Well, I hope he has,' said my aunt; 'but I doubt it, if it's anything good.'

Without being what is called 'a good hater,' Aunt Ben did not lose in her Christian principles, what many weak people are too apt to part with, an honest contempt for meanness of all kinds. In our general philanthropy and universal brotherhood, we are sometimes inclined to open our arms to rogues and tyrants; but my aunt knew the wheat from the tares.

The Holksham doctor, in whose district Gatcombe also lay, joined our little dinner-party that evening; and though nothing was said at table about the matter, I knew

that his fears had been confirmed as to the nature of the epidemic in the village, and that it was no longer confined to a single cottage. On the next day, the church-bell tolled both in the morning and in the afternoon—an unprecedented occurrence at Gatcombe; and I observed that our domestics looked pale and frightened.

'Is the fever very bad?' asked I of Aunt Ben.

'Yes, Fred. If I was your father, I should send you away. He was only saying this morning what a relief it is to him that Cecil and Jane are not with us.'

'Good heavens!' said I; 'but if there is really danger, is not Eleanor in the midst of it?'

'It is her place to be there, as the clergyman's daughter; or, at least, she thinks so. Never fear for her, Fred: God protects His own angels. If you had seen her, as I have seen her, these last two days, you would have felt sure of that.'

'So I, not being an angel, ought to leave Gatcombe, you think, while Nelly, and you, and my father run all risks?'

'Of course; since we are of use, and you can be of none. If anything was to happen to you, Fred, it would break your father's heart, and yet he is too proud to say so. That is so like a man.'

'And yet, Aunt Ben, I think you would think it was very *un*like a man, if I was to say to my father: "This fever frightens me; let me go away and hide somewhere out of the way of it."'

'No; of course you can't do that. But what I want is this: to impress on you, that if your father should suggest your leaving Gatcombe on any other pretence, however apparently insufficient, do not balk him, for what he will really have in his mind is to save your life.' I suppose I could not suppress a smile, for she added vehemently: 'If you think that there is not peril, Fred, and great peril, too, you are much mistaken.

The fever is of the most virulent sort. If a mad dog was known to be loose in the village, you would say there was danger there, I conclude. Well, there are, as it were, half-a-dozen mad dogs there loose already; and before the week is out, there will be a whole pack.'

This prophecy was fulfilled to the letter; the church-bell began to toll daily, and on the Sunday it did not ring for church, for the rector himself was taken ill. No sooner did I hear this news, than, forgetting my promise about not visiting the village, I started for the rectory in hot haste. At the gate of the avenue my father met me.

'Fred,' said he reproachfully, 'I did not think this of you. I charged you not to come up here; and you do not obey me. Beware lest *He* should keep *His* word who says the fruit of disobedience is death.'

'But, sir,' urged I, 'I have just heard that Mr. Bourne has got the fever, and I must see Eleanor, and—'

'What for?' returned my father. 'She is where she ought to be—by her father's pillow; I have just left her there. If she is fated to catch the disease, your presence will not prevent her doing so, while your life will be endangered to no purpose. Her own lips have just besought me to keep you out of harm's way; I had thought that my injunctions would have been sufficient to do so, but I now add her entreaties to my own.'

'It appears to me, sir, that you would make a coward of me,' said I bitterly, for the thought of Eleanor's peril swallowed up even consideration for my father.

'No, no, Fred,' returned he tenderly. 'It is I that am the coward; I confess it.'

What could I do, in return for such an avowal of affection, but take his hand and promise that unless Eleanor was herself attacked by the fever, I would not pass the gates?

He expressed himself as gratefully as though I was thus taking measures for the preservation of his own life instead of mine; and after dinner that evening, for the first time referred to the contents of Cecil's letter, with the sense, I am sure, of my having earned their calm discussion at his hands. The subject of my future calling—because it suggested our separation—was always distasteful to him; while to have to disagree with me on the point was still more painful. And was it possible for however fond a father to do otherwise than disapprove the idea of his son's becoming by profession a writer for the stage?

He entered upon the subject characteristically enough. As we strolled upon the lawn, and passed into the shadow of a fragrant lime, he looked up into its green and murmurous depths, and quoted, from Mackenzie's 'Praise of a Country Life,'

'Be sure no laurel casts so sweet a shade;'

then he went on to speak of the pursuit of Fame, its disappointments, the tardy fruition of it, and its unsatisfactoriness even when attained.

I listened respectfully, and not without gratitude to the generosity which led him to thus discuss the general question, when it would have been obviously so much easier for him to point out the folly and impracticability of my particular plan.

'I have mixed with the world, dear Fred, myself,' concluded he, 'and was once the very opposite of the recluse you have known me. If experience can ever be of use at secondhand, it should be so to you, for you know I am incapable of deceiving you. Take this, dear boy, as truth, then, from your father's lips—"a mind content both crown and kingdom is," and cease to hanker after what is not even gold, but worthless tinsel.'

I did not answer, for I naturally imagined, from his words, that my case had

been considered and finally adjudicated upon. Then he laid his hand upon my shoulder, and added sadly, 'But perhaps, Fred, your mind is *not* content?'

'It is not, sir,' said I, 'I own. I have, it is true, no reason to complain of anything that you have done for me.'

'Nor left undone?' inquired my father quickly.

'No, sir; nor left undone. I do not regret that I have never been at school.' I knew what was in his thoughts: the consciousness that he loved to have me with him, and shrank from parting with me, sometimes made him reproach himself—quite unnecessarily, as I still think—for not having intrusted my education to other hands. 'It is impossible that my boyhood could have been more happy; and indeed, until quite lately, my whole life. But—' Here I hesitated; for how could I tell him that his love, and the home he had made so pleasant, no longer sufficed me?

'You would say that Gatcombe is but a dull place, Fred, now that Cecil is gone. Well, it is but natural that you should feel it so. I have made up my mind to part with you for a time. You shall go to college.'

'Very good, sir; if it so pleases you.'

'That means, it would not please *you*, Fred? Yet, to most lads, college is a pleasant place; and that companionship you now miss would there be supplied to you in abundance.'

'But I am not fit to go to college,' said I. 'I know little or nothing that is taught there—not that I blame you for that, sir, for I have no desire for such knowledge; but such is the case, as you well know.'

'What *do* you want, Fred?' inquired my father, not angrily, but with the vehemence of one who wishes to know the worst at once. 'You don't wish to go and live in London by yourself, at your age, surely, in hopes to carry the citadel of Fame at your pen's point?'

'I should like to try my fortune, sir, with—on—in dramatic writing. Of course, I seem very young for such an experiment; but Lady Repton tells me that all I need is knowledge of practical details, which I can only acquire by observation. You have told me yourself that my talents as a playwright are far from contemptible. Perhaps you are wrong in so judging; and perhaps my own self-confidence is misplaced; but if so, we shall soon find it out. I can but try, you know: all I ask is a fair field.'

My father looked at me with an affectionate pity.

'"Ah, worthless wit,"' he murmured, '"to train him
to this use;
Deceitful arts, that nourish discontent."'

'Nay,' said I; 'the art you have taught me to admire, so far from making me discontented, has been the greatest pleasure of my life, and is so.'

He smiled to see me so eager to defend

him from himself, but shook his head. 'I never dreamed that you would have taken our little recreations so dreadfully in earnest, lad. Indeed, indeed, it will not do. The glories of the stage,

"Like glow-worms, afar off shine bright,
But looked to near, have neither heat nor light."'

'Well, let me look at them near, and find them so,' urged I. 'Then I will acknowledge my error. *If* I fail, it will not break my heart.'

'I am not so sure of that, dear lad,' said my father gravely.

'"Full little knowest thou, who hast not tried,
What hell it is in suing long to ride;
To lose good days that might be better spent;
To waste long nights in feverish discontent;
To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow;
To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow;
To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares;
To eat thy heart, through comfortless despairs;
To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to run,
To spend, to give, then find thyself undone."

You are not of the family of the Thickskins.

The noble savage, however noble, is not fitted to contend against a race that is clothed in armour, or, rather, that is pachydermatous. My dear Fred,' added my father, drawing himself up, and speaking with a scorn of which I did not think his nature capable, 'you have no idea of the grossness of the people with whom you would have to do—their vulgarity, their jealousies, their— Is it possible that Lady Repton has deceived you in this matter? I thought I could have trusted her to have told you the whole truth.'

'She did not seem to like theatrical managers,' said I demurely; 'and she told me that the stage would be a delightful profession, if it were not for the actors and actresses.'

My father laughed at this, and rubbed his hands; and I hastened to press what I considered to be my advantage.

'I daresay the stage is a corrupt school, sir; but then I don't wish to go on the

stage, but to write for it. You have often told me that you believe I have good principles; and, thanks to you, I trust it is so.

"What though I on a sledge be drawn,
And mangled by a hind,
I do defy the traitor's power;
He cannot harm my mind."'

'Your quotation is not a happy one,' observed my father coldly, 'since its author passed the whole of his own short life in misusing his talents to the worst of purposes.' (The unfortunate Chatterton was never forgiven by my father for having feloniously imitated, and, still worse, for having occasionally surpassed his favourites, the old English poets.) 'I was not, however, referring to the mere vices of the stage, from which, I believe, you would, for more than one reason, be preserved' (here I blushed, for I knew that he referred to my love for Eleanor), 'so much as to the low standard of morals generally, which, as I have been told on good authority, is held by those

connected with it. You are very young and impressionable; and even if it were otherwise, the influence of constant contact with shallow, vulgar natures must needs be baneful. I cannot let you go, Fred, from my side into the midst of so many perils. If I had friends in London who could offer you a home—any relative, such as your Aunt Ben, for instance—I would not balk you of your humour, fantastic as it would seem to most fathers. But as it is, dear Fred, I must say "No" decisively. When this trouble in the village is over, we shall all need change, and perhaps we three may go up to town together; and then you shall try your luck as you desire, and plumb the depths of ocean safely from the shore.'

I had bowed my head when he said 'No,' in disappointment, but in submission; for, eagerly as I longed to enter life on my own account, my father's will was law to me; and now that it seemed he himself was after all about to place me in the very path

I would have chosen, I could scarcely find words to express my gratitude and joy.

'Well, well, my lad,' said he, embracing me fondly, 'I have no doubt that all wise men will say I spoil you. Don't tell Aunt Ben that I have given in thus far to your wild fancies, or she will think I have taken leave of my senses. She will have no objection, however—if I know the sex—to stay a few months in town.—And now let us go in, for it is getting cold.'

He shivered, not as I fancied, for the reason he assigned, for it was a warm windless night; but because the thought, that all our quiet days together at Gatcombe were nigh ended, struck a chill to his very heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SICK-ROOM.

THE next morning, my father did not take his usual place at breakfast; and my aunt herself came down later than was her wont. I noticed that she held a letter in her hand, though it was before the usual post-time, and was looking very grave.

'What is the matter?' inquired I, with apprehension. 'There is no bad news of Cecil, I hope?'

'No, dear; nor any bad news at all, please God. But your father is rather indisposed this morning, and—this is a letter he wishes you to take to Monkton.'

'For the doctor?' cried I, starting to my feet. 'He must be ill, then.'

'No, not for the doctor.' I had my

fingers on the door-handle, when Aunt Ben seized my arm. 'You must not go upstairs. He has forbidden it. You are to take that letter to Canon Browne.'

'To Canon Browne?' exclaimed I, with amazement. 'Well, so I will, but not before I have seen my father. I am sure he is ill; I am certain of it by your face.'

My aunt burst into tears.

'He *is* ill, Fred. I believe he has got the fever. I have been up with him since two this morning.'

'Good God! while I have been dreaming of my own plans and pleasures! Has the doctor been sent for?'

'Hours ago. Everything has been done that can be done.'

A bitter sense of my own selfishness pervaded me, and I groaned aloud.

'It is through no neglect of yours, Fred, nor of anybody's,' said Aunt Ben gravely, 'save of him who has let things come to such a pass in the cottages. But the truth

is, the whole place is plague-smitten. Your father has written to his old friend the canon, beseeching him to take you in at Monkton for a week or two, and you are to start at once. I will see to packing up your things.'

'What?' cried I indignantly. 'I am to go and enjoy myseif, while you are all sick and dying here!'

'I have given you your father's message, Fred,' said my aunt quietly, but she trembled both in speech and limb.

'And you think I ought to obey it, do you?' demanded I. 'You and he have your duties, it seems, and Eleanor and the rector —and even old Mr. Bourne, although he neglects them—but I have nothing to consult but my own safety. Is that your opinion, Aunt Ben? You love me well, I know, but *your* love does not surely blind you so to what is right for me to do, as to suggest such conduct?'

'I promised to do your father's bidding,

Fred, and I have done it,' said my aunt with a sigh of relief, and withdrawing herself from the door. 'If you decline to obey it, I must say that in this matter I cannot blame you.'

She held out her arms, and kissed me fondly.

'I knew you would not leave him, Fred,' sobbed she; 'I told him so. Go up, and tend him, and may God preserve you both to one another!'

I have often wondered whether it would not be a good plan—though, of course, a very 'ridiculous,' 'Quixotic,' and 'impracticable' one—to include in our present course of education, even if it should curtail it a little in other respects (such as Greek verse and conchology), one or two simple subjects the knowledge of which might make us useful to our fellow-creatures. For instance, since neither good birth nor wealth can debar those very vulgar visitors, Disease and Death, from making

an occasional call, why should we not *all* be in some measure prepared for their reception? When our nearest and dearest are struck down by sickness, why should we be so ignorant of what is necessary to be done, as to be obliged to leave everything—even in the way of mere tendance—to hireling hands, or learn our duties at the expense of the patient? How gladly, if we *could*, would we minister to him, and smooth his pillow with our loving hands! but the consciousness of our incompetence forbids it. It is not that the calamity unmans us, but that, being something wholly out of our experience, we stand useless and agape at it. Our presence, which might have been so helpful as well as consolatory, is better dispensed with; our room is wanted for others who have aid to give; and we are 'in the way.' A coming in on tiptoe, often at undesirable times, to see our dear one; a hushed inquiry of his mercenary ally, the nurse, as to his progress; and a kiss of his

forehead, or pressure of his hot hand, at morn and eve, are all the assistance we can offer to him.

It is true that women (all at least who are worthy to be called such) have more or less of this gift of ministering to the sick bestowed on them by nature; but men have no such dower, and how often is it that, afar from country and from home, men fall sick among men only! In the upper classes of England, it is not too much to say, that more men would be found qualified to doctor a sick horse than to nurse a sick man.

The miserable failures that I myself made as an attendant at my dear father's bedside haunt me still, though, in the end, since there was plenty of time in which to learn, I succeeded in making myself useful. Unluckily, from the very first, he loved to receive his medicine and be turned on his uneasy pillow by my hands; to speak into my longing ears the broken words I could

often not interpret; and, when at his worst, to be read to by my voice—most trying task of all, since, unaccustomed as I was to control my feelings, it would break down, choked with sobs.

Never shall I forget that first morning when I entered his sick-room—without my shoes, for fear my clumsy footsteps should disturb him—and gazed upon him as he lay with eyes half-closed, and cheeks that, by contrast with the white sheets, looked crimson. What thoughts passed through my brain of Death and Eternal parting, and the house without its head! What self-reproaches for not having valued at his worth the friend and father whom I might now lose for ever! As I inadvertently stirred the curtain, my father, thinking it was Aunt Ben returned, murmured anxiously: 'Is he gone? Is Fred gone?'

'No, sir; I am here,' said I. 'Do not be vexed; I am come to nurse you. If, as you said, Eleanor's place was beside her

father's pillow, surely mine is also there.' I took the hand he would have drawn away, and kissed him. Then I knew that it would be too late to send me away, since, if I was to take harm, the mischief would be already done; and I should be unsafe to be received elsewhere.

'My boy, my boy!' he murmured mournfully, but not reproachfully; and then such a contented smile came over his noble face that I felt my presence was a joy to him after all.

This 'Gatcombe fever,' as it was subsequently called in the neighbourhood, was almost as virulent and rapid in doing its evil work as the Plague itself. The heat of the weather, which was excessive, doubtless aided it; and the insufficient drainage, and neglect of all sorts in the village, was as fuel to its fire. Whenever, through the open windows of the sick-room, came the tolling of the church-bell, as it did daily, my father would inquire calmly: 'Who is

it, Fred?' and his words went to my heart like another knell. A new aspect of life had unfolded itself to me. Instead of amusements, and studies that were themselves amusement, completing the whole round of my existence, I was now brought face to face with the expectation of death. We talk of the ignorance of the rich as to the ways of the poor, and truly it is great and terrible, but not more complete than that of the sound with respect to the thoughts of the sick. It is good for us to have knowledge upon both points. The affairs of the world assume their just proportions only when we are leaving it, or are watching others leave it. What does this and that matter, which was so important yesterday, to him who is going beyond the stars to-morrow? or to us who are bidding him good-bye, and feel that we shall rejoin him there so shortly?

These ideas, however, did not affect me much at first. My father was always cheer-

ful in his manner; and if he showed any apprehension of his illness having a fatal result, it was only in increased affection for those about him.

'If you want to see an angel before you go to heaven,' said he, speaking of my aunt, 'watch a good woman in a sick-room.'

Aunt Ben made no noise with her wings; she never 'broke down' as to her feelings; she forgot nothing that should be remembered; she introduced no topic that would have been out of place. The doctor and she had long conferences together with closed doors; but, no matter what she had heard, whenever she reëntered my father's room, it was with unruffled features; if she wept, she used some elixir for red eyes. On one day only, the first on which my father began to talk of his brother Thomas as though he were alive, did I see any change in her; she turned pale to her very lips, and confided to me that it always 'gave her a turn' to hear people talk when delirious.

I afterwards discovered, however, that the doctor had previously informed her, that if my father should lose his senses, it would be a bad sign. His memory did not fail him even at this pass. I heard him once repeat half-a-dozen verses of Byrom's 'Careless Content'—the poem he liked best of all poems, save those of the Elizabethan era—though he imagined himself to be in Monkton Cathedral, repeating the responses.

'With good and gentle-humour'd hearts
I choose to chat where'er I come,
Whate'er the subject be that starts;
But if I get among the glum,
I hold my tongue to tell the truth,
And keep my breath to cool my broth.

* * * *

Of ups and downs, of ins and outs,
Of they're i' the wrong, and we're i' the right,
I shun the rancours and the routs;
And wishing well to every wight,
Whatever turn the matter takes,
I deem it all but ducks and drakes.

* * * *

I love my neighbour as myself,
Myself like him too, by his leave;
Nor to his pleasure, power, or pelf,
Came I to crouch, as I conceive:
Dame Nature doubtless has design'd
A man the monarch of his mind.'

My father never wholly lost that monarchy, but, after a temporary abdication of it, would reassume it, and become himself again; then he would pray with us, and for us, using grand old prayers, such as Taylor's or Sir Thomas More's. But for the most part he lay as one who had long made his peace with God, and had leisure to concern himself with the affairs of those he loved.

'When I am gone, Fred—if I do go—you and Aunt Ben must not part.'

This I most readily promised.

Then he asked to see Eleanor (this was after he had been ill for weeks); and she came accordingly, in black, for the rector had died on the third day of his seizure—a fact, however, which we had kept from my

father's knowledge. I had not seen her, though Aunt Ben had done so, because of the word that I had given that I would not pass the gates, notwithstanding there was, of course, no danger now to be incurred that was not risked already. Every wish of my father's was become sacred.

We met in the drawing-room, and embraced one another in Aunt Ben's presence, without the least embarrassment; though my heart was so sad, it never held her dearer than at that moment, when I seemed not only her lover but her brother.

My aunt dressed her in some coloured clothes belonging to Jane, before she went into the sick-room, and she wore as cheerful a countenance as she could assume. But, as it happened, all our pains were needless; for my father, desiring to see her alone, she told him the whole truth, being, as she said, unable to do otherwise; at which I did not wonder. He commended me to her, as she told me long afterwards, in the most tender

terms, and blessed her as his future daughter-in-law.

To me, when she had departed, he repeated those exquisite lines of Middleton:

'The treasures of the deep are not so precious
As are the conceal'd comforts of a man
Lock'd up in woman's love. I scent the air
Of blessings when I come but near the house.
What a delicious breath marriage sends forth!
The violet-bed's not sweeter!'

'Your Eleanor is a true pearl, Fred. O, never leave her for a counterfeit!

"Base Passion,
With all her powders, paintings, and best pride,
Is but a fair house built by a ditch-side."'

It was not worth while at such a time to speak of the obstacles which I foresaw would be opposed to our union, and, besides, his confidence in the matter gave me hope.

That was the last day on which my father was thoroughly himself. His mind now mingled past with present in sad

confusion. He spoke again of my Uncle Thomas, but this time as if he had been accused of Richard Waller's death. 'A shameful thing!' he murmured. 'No Wray could do it. Well, well, I shall know all from him.'

'From whom, father?' inquired I.

'From Batty, lad. I am going to see poor Batty. Why not?'

When he was almost at the last, we pressed the doctor to stay on with us, which he did; the Gatcombe fever having by this time burned itself out, like some raging prairie-fire, and thus left him some leisure; else my father would never permit him to pay a longer visit than he imagined his own case to demand.

'Can *nothing* more be done?' inquired my aunt in a despairing whisper.

'Nothing but what we are doing, madam; the case is, alas, beyond all remedy.'

Never shall I forget how the voice of the dying man, whom we had thought co-

matose, electrified us, as it broke in with this reply:

> 'No, no; the remedy
> Must be a winding-sheet, a fold of lead,
> And some untrod-on corner of the earth.'

Then he went on from the same old play of Ford's:

> 'I have left me
> But one poor jewel to bequeath: my Fame,
> By scandal yet untouch'd; this I bequeath
> To Memory and Time's old daughter, Truth;
> If ever my unhappy name find mention
> When I am fallen to dust, may it deserve
> Beseeming charity without dishonour!'

These words, expressed with infinite pathos, though in weak and faltering tones, were my father's last. He had his wish. No man of his race or place ever died more beloved, or left a memory more unstained behind him. An enormous concourse of persons of all ranks attended his funeral, notwithstanding the danger of coming to our decimated village, and especially on such an errand. Of all our immediate neighbours,

Mr. Bourne alone made himself conspicuous by his absence; in any other man, an excuse would have offered itself in the fact of his own recent bereavement; but it was evident that he did not wish excuse to be made for him, for he showed himself ostentatiously elsewhere.

CHAPTER IX.

I ASK GRANDPAPA.

At first, I was so filled with the sense of my great loss, that there was no room for any other feeling; what old Mr. Bourne might think or do, was absolutely without interest to me. The Manor-house seemed like a vault, and though the summer grew and glowed about it, all was with me as faded autumn. My father's study, where I had listened to his wise words a thousand times, and never heard a hasty one, was become a holy place; for the first time I began to understand the reverence which attaches to mere sacred *things*. The chair in which he had been wont to sit at dinner-time was put aside; I could not use it. His favourite books were become solemn scrip-

tures, and the quotations so familiar to his lips like hallowed texts.

As regards all that related to my father personally, indeed, it has never been otherwise; the link of love between us, by the miracle that only Love can work, has lengthened without growing weaker; but as time went on, I found myself looking less and less within myself, and more and more upon the world without. The want of occupation began to make itself felt, and the need of something to supply, however inadequately, the noble companionship I had lost for ever. Aunt Ben was all she could be to me, and far more than I deserved; but my heart yearned for consolation of another sort, and it was denied me. Not only was Eleanor forbidden by her grandfather to visit us on any pretence, but to converse with me if we chanced to meet. I often saw her at a distance, haunting the spots where we had been wont to be so happy together years ago; but I did not dare approach her, lest

I should draw down upon her the old man's wrath; for, orphaned like myself, she had no comforter at home, as I had in Aunt Ben, but only the society of this crabbed relative, who had power to make her life even more wearisome and sombre than it was, through his ill-humour. How strange it seemed that my father, whom all loved, and whose existence was a joy to others, should have been taken from the world he brightened, while this old withered wretch, who had wrought naught but harm, should be left in it, standing not only between me and Eleanor, but between all men and the sun! For his influence was that of an evil spirit, unhappy in himself, and hating to see others happy. Fear and Hate were the demons that sprung up at his footstep; and if the lips of Subservience wished him 'good-morrow,' in her heart she wished him dead.

'Well, he is old,' thought I, 'and must needs die soon; and in the mean time pa-

tience!' But it is not so easy to practise that virtue as to talk about it; and when I reflected how much less easy it was for Nelly to practise it than for me, I felt very bitter against the old man. This was but natural, perhaps; but beside my strong personal feeling toward Eleanor, the recollection that my father had expressed his wish that we should be united, weighed with me very powerfully; and I looked upon 'the Alchemist' as a rebel against an authority that was to me almost divine.

This was most unreasonable, I own.

Many weary months had thus passed by, when a second letter arrived from Cecil, written from South America, and full of his first impressions of its wondrous scenery. He represented all things as brightly as he could; but it was clear to me, by the feverish eagerness he expressed for news from home, that no change of scene would give him any genuine pleasure while Batty's statement remained undisproved. There

were many affectionate messages — they touched me to the heart—for an ear that was deaf for ever; and in addition, a curious native account of the origin of crocodiles' tears, which he thought would tickle my father's sense of humour. 'These creatures having devoured a man, find themselves unable to swallow the head; and taking it to a solitary spot, they are accustomed to bewail their inability to conclude their meal with tears.' Then immediately afterwards, though the proximity was certainly not due to any association of ideas in the writer's mind, occurred these words: 'Dear Jane bids me send her love to all at Gatcombe. How selfish it is in me to have carried her away from home and friends, that she never ceases to bewail, I know, though she does her best, for my sake, to hide her tears!'

'The poor thing can't swallow our heads,' exclaimed Aunt Ben, as I read this out; at which we laughed together, the first laugh

that had been heard in the old house for many a day.

Cecil made no allusion to Ruth, but a letter was enclosed to her as before, which I was obliged to put aside with the other one. How strange it seemed that she had not confided to either of us whither she was going! My cousin's communication ended with renewed expressions of tender affection for us all, and a kindly message for Nelly. 'Have you asked papa,' inquired he, 'and grandpapa? I should indeed be glad to hear that your happiness was assured, even if the fulfilment of it should not be for the present, not only upon your own account, dear Fred, but on another's. I fear there is still some hope in a quarter where I grieve to see it. In fact, the news that your engagement had been acknowledged would be to me only less welcome than that other piece of intelligence, for which I pant as the hart for the water-brooks.'

I could not give this letter into my aunt's hands because of its allusion to Jane's misplaced affection for myself; but when I had read the rest of it aloud, she observed, 'Dear Cecil is a curious mixture—so wayward and impulsive in his own affairs, and wise and sensible when thinking for others.'

'Do you think his advice is good as respects Nelly, aunt?'

'Unquestionably, Fred,' she answered. 'I was only waiting for an opportunity to suggest it to you myself. It is quite impossible that you can live on at Gatcombe in this way; you will be moped to death; and before you leave it, it is only right that you should understand your exact position with respect to dear Eleanor. Mr. Bourne is bound to express himself clearly upon that point, and the sooner you come to an understanding the better. I am quite sure that her poor father was in favour of your union; a fact which, at all events, will pre

vent that wretched old man from talking about the duty of obedience. He is *such* a canter! I sometimes wonder whether any people *do* talk about duties except those that habitually neglect them.'

Since the outbreak of the fever, that 'wretched old man' was more abhorrent to my aunt than ever, though I never heard her directly accuse him of having been its cause; perhaps she was too charitable to do so, and perhaps her religious opinions were of a nature to attach the sense of 'visitation' to such calamities, rather than to account for them in a material way. Her present bitterness, as I suspected, arose from the consideration that the Alchemist would oppose himself to my projected proposal to the uttermost; and I asked her frankly whether such was her opinion.

'I scarcely know what to say, Fred,' she replied. 'The old man, like all *parvenus*, is doubtless desirous of an alliance for his granddaughter with a family of position

and good blood: he would not mind—not much, at least—the want of means in such a *parti*. I even think that at one time he did not look unfavourably upon your own intimacy at the Rectory. But the unhappy circumstances connected with poor Batty have undoubtedly embittered him against us. He can't refuse you an interview, of course; but you must be very careful how you play your cards. In any event, you must not quarrel with him, for Eleanor's sake.'

'Of course not,' said I indignantly. 'Why should I quarrel, when, whether he says "Yes" or "No," will not affect our future in the least, except so far, I suppose, as his filthy money goes?'

'Yes, but you mustn't tell him *that*, my dear Fred, but, on the contrary, be very submissive and conciliatory; and you must not talk of money as "filthy," because it is with him a very sacred thing. You will have to lay before him the state of your

own affairs, with which, of course,' added my aunt dryly, 'you are fully acquainted.'

'I am not quite sure that I am,' said I with hesitation.

'I am quite sure that you are *not*, you silly boy,' was Aunt Ben's rejoinder. 'When your father's will was read, I doubt whether you heard three words of it. Well, you have no fortune, of course, to be called such, but still enough to live upon in a quiet way: the Manor-house and what land is left about it are of considerable value, and will have a fancy price in the old man's eyes, who has so long been hankering after them. You can point out to him how complete the Gatcombe estate would be made by an alliance between the heir of the old race and the daughter of the new: but don't be too romantic, Fred; I would not advise you to try poetry, because I don't think he's fond of it.'

She spoke quite seriously, and I said, 'Thank you, aunt. I should have thought

Mr. Bourne was just the sort of person to delight in music, poetry, painting, and the fine arts; but I bow to your better judgment.'

'You may laugh, my dear,' returned she good-humouredly; 'but my belief is that I could manage this affair much better than you; however, I suppose that wouldn't be quite business-like.'

'I am afraid not,' said I doubtfully; 'or else I am sure I should be delighted to have you for my advocate, and indeed to have a much less efficient proxy. I do so very much dislike that old gentleman! "Hang him, Rook," as my poor father used to say.'

'Yes, but you must forget all that when you are talking to him. Think of Eleanor, and that will bring a pleasant expression into your features.—By the bye, Fred, when speaking of your own affairs, you will not omit, of course, to mention your expectations.'

'Expectations! What expectations?'

'Well, my dear, the word speaks for itself. God forbid that anything should happen to Cecil; but I suppose no contingencies ought to be left out when dealing with these matters, and especially with an old schemer like Mr. Bourne. You are your cousin's heir-presumptive, remember.'

'My dear aunt,' exclaimed I reprovingly, 'I am astonished at you: nothing could induce me to hint at such a thing to Mr. Bourne, and indeed the idea has never entered my own mind.'

'So I supposed, and that is why I mentioned it,' observed Aunt Ben coolly. 'However, whether you hint at it or not, it is quite certain that Mr. Bourne will not forget the fact; so it does not much matter.'

The opinion which my aunt had passed on Cecil, that he was impulsive in his own affairs, but thoughtful for others, might, in fact, with a little modification, have been applied to herself. She was disinterested

and unselfish, even to excess; but when her advice was sought by those she loved, she was eminently shrewd and practical; nor is such inconsistency uncommon, especially in the female sex.

The very next morning after this council of war (and love), I put a bold face upon a beating heart, and walked up to the Rectory. The new clergyman, a young bachelor, had been glad to let the house for a consideration, and lived in lodgings in the village, while Mr. Bourne and Eleanor retained their old home. It was a pretty little house, overgrown with jasmine and honeysuckle, the scent of which, as I think of that visit, is fragrant still. I did not dare look up at the window, lest the sight of Eleanor should disturb my equanimity, but like an eager dog, kept my eyes fixed downcast on the door.

'Is Mr. Bourne at—' I had begun, before I perceived that it was the old gentleman himself who had opened it to me. I

think he enjoyed my confusion thereupon, though he never evinced any sign of enjoyment beyond a momentary stretching of the lips, which instantly returned to their due limits, like an india-rubber band. He was very tall, but stooped a good deal, and carried his head on one side, like a cunning fox as he was. His hair was white as snow, but so it had been for years, and his face had a fresh brown colour, which boded length of days.

'To what am I indebted for this visit, young sir?' said he, looking through and through me with his keen black eyes, the only attribute his granddaughter and he had in common. 'I thought I had let you know you were not welcome here; but being lord of the manor, perhaps you imagine you have a right to come where you please.'

He spoke with mocking severity, and in allusion, as I well understood, to some disagreement which my father and he had had

long ago respecting a right of way. I felt such an allusion to be not only in the worst taste, but to signify a hostile attitude; but I thought of Eleanor and smiled.

'I wish to have a few minutes' private conversation with you, Mr. Bourne,' said I.

He led the way into his business-room—a bare parchment-littered apartment, which by no stretch of courtesy could have been termed a study—closed the door, and without asking me to sit down, wheeled about and exclaimed: 'Well, what is it?'

How lightly Time and Loss affect some men! Here was one who had reached the threescore years and ten allotted to mortals, and had just seen his only son drop into the grave, the victim, in part, of his own neglect; and yet, but for his white hairs and his black clothes, there was nothing to proclaim either fact. The harshness of every feature remained unsoftened; the fire of his eye unquenched; his voice alone had that querulous tone which speaks of age, and

even that had less of querulousness in it than of downright suspicion.

'I am come, sir, to speak to you about Eleanor.'

'So I suspected, young gentleman,' returned he grimly, and regarding me with great disfavour. 'I cannot prevent your speaking of her, but I will take care that you never speak *to* her—you may take your oath of that.'

'May I ask you why, sir?'

'You may ask, of course; whether I shall answer or not is another matter. I will tell you this much, however, that if you think you are a great man because that tumble-down old house and a few acres of cottage-garden are now your own, you are much mistaken.'

'I don't consider myself a great man, Mr. Bourne,' said I quietly; 'but I am a gentleman, I hope, and though not rich, I am not without independent means. There is nothing incongruous, I should suppose, or

at least not so much so that it cannot be listened to, in my proposing for your granddaughter's hand. Her father, your son, was, as she will tell you, by no means averse to the prospect of my being her suitor. Of course, I am not speaking of anything immediate. We are both very young, and I have to make my way in the world. All we ask of you at present is to give us leave to meet occasionally, to correspond, and, in short, to be engaged to one another.'

'Very reasonable indeed, I'm sure!' observed the old man in mocking tones. 'It is very modest of you not to insist upon being married to-morrow, and on my allowing you five thousand a year! You say that my son was not averse to this little scheme: I daresay, now, that your own father was in favour of it?'

'He was, sir. He had a very high regard for Eleanor, and thought I should be most fortunate if I could win such a wife.'

'And doubtless you think so too, young gentleman?'

'Indeed, I do, sir. I know very well that I am not worthy of her. As to her fortune—'

'That's right—now we are coming to it,' sneered the old fellow, rubbing his hands, and inclining his ear towards me with much politeness. 'Her eighty thousand pounds or so? Well, what of that?'

'I don't want her fortune, sir, if you will only give me Eleanor.'

'And do you really mean to say that you are come up here to try such a stale device and sorry falsehood upon *me?*' exclaimed the old man angrily. 'Your taste — inherited, I believe — for play-acting or play-writing—it's all one—must be indeed a ruling passion. Now hear me once for all. If you ever marry my grand-daughter, you will wed a beggar, for not a shilling—as your wife—shall she ever have of mine. To some folks, one would say: "That is answer

enough;" but you, forsooth—you Wrays—are careless about fortunes; lose them, spend them, and then affect to despise riches. Your father did so, and perhaps you may be like him; but though such high and mighty indifference—whether feigned or genuine, it matters not—be doubtless a fine thing, it is not so fine, remember, to make *others* poor (who may not possess such philosophy), in order to gratify your private vanity. You have no right, I say, to make a simple, ignorant girl blind to her own advantage, and sacrifice great prospects to your selfish pleasure.'

As he said these words he watched my face like a ferret, and I suppose it betrayed some chagrin; for I had not expected him to take this line of argument, which certainly was not without its weight. 'No, young man,' he went on in milder tones, 'we have all our duty to perform in this world, and our inclinations must submit to it. I will do you the justice to say that I

do not believe you so devoid of principle as to strive to win my grand-daughter in direct opposition to my wishes.'

I had not understood until that moment what my aunt had meant by calling Mr. Bourne 'a canter;' he had never as yet had any necessity in my case to use the phrases of morality which he employed with my elders, when defending his own meanness, or advocating harsh enactments with respect to the poor; but I felt now as if I was being sprinkled with holy water by the devil, and with some difficulty restrained myself from saying so.

'So far as the principle of which you speak is concerned in this matter, Mr. Bourne,' said I quietly, 'I must frankly tell you that the approval of Eleanor's father is quite sufficient for me, though, of course, if I could gain your consent—'

'Which you never will gain,' interrupted the old man coldly. 'Let me frankly tell you that, young jackanapes. If it comes to

frankness, indeed, I may say that there was a day when I might have answered you otherwise, and that you have nobody to thank for your present disappointment but your own father. When next you think of his high-mindedness, independence of spirit, generosity, and all the rest of it, you may think of that also, for your comfort.'

It is impossible to describe in words the malice of the speaker's tone, or the antipathy which his sneering features expressed towards me.

'It will be my comfort to think,' said I, looking at him steadily, 'that not even to secure my happiness could my father be tempted to commit a baseness.'

There was a moment when I thought the old man would have struck me, so terrible was the passion in his face at this allusion to his attempt to burk inquiry into Batty's case; but he curbed himself, and, in a half-smothered voice, inquired: 'Have you anything else to say, young gentleman,

before we part, since this will be your last chance to say it?'

'Yes,' said I; 'I must be permitted to remark, that what you have just said with reference to my father, convinces me that your objection to my suit is founded, not on the grounds you would have had me believe—my insufficiency of fortune—but on hereditary dislike. My dead father did you what you choose to imagine a wrong, and you revenge yourself upon his son. That is cowardly and infamous!'

'You lie!' cried the old man, trembling with rage. 'I always hated you, the whole lot of you, for your pride and stubbornness, that is true; but *you* are proud and stubborn, and a beggar as well; and my grandchild is meat for your master. The proudest family in England might be proud of her, ay, and the richest. Let her marry whom she will but you—*but you*—and she is my heiress; let her marry *you*, and she shall inherit nothing but my curse! Now,

go.' Here he led the way into the hall. 'You have my answer, Pauper Wray.'

Something in this depreciatory epithet, of the application of which he was obviously very proud, for he continued to repeat it—'Pauper Wray, Pauper Wray'—as he stood, with mock-politeness, with his hand on the outer door, reminded me of what my aunt had mentioned concerning the possibility of my succeeding to my cousin's wealth; I paused, therefore, upon the threshold, to observe: 'I am no pauper, Mr. Bourne; but your constant harping on that word suggests to me that, notwithstanding your antipathy to my race, you might not have been so obdurate, had Cecil, instead of his poor cousin, come to woo your granddaughter.'

'Cecil, Cecil Wray!' cried the old man shrilly; 'how dare you say so! His heart is as black as his face! He is a murderer; and if I had had my way, I tell you I would have seen justice done, and had him hanged!'

I confess that it was wrong, but stung beyond endurance by this infamous speech, I forgot myself so far as to reply, with all the significance of which my voice was capable: 'Nay, we are all sorry for poor Batty, sir, but you should not allow *paternal affection* to blind you to the fact that his statement was unfounded.'

For an instant he glared upon me with a face convulsed by rage and hate, and then slammed the door behind me.

I doubt whether any course of conduct on my part, however diplomatic, would have much influenced the event; but, as it was, I felt that I had far from prospered in my wooing with grandpapa.

CHAPTER X.

HOW THE GREAT MR. MAGNUS TREATED ME.

I TOLD my aunt all that had passed between myself and Mr. Bourne, and although she took me to task for having been tempted to use bitterness, I don't think that she much blamed me in her heart for resenting his cruel words against Cecil.

'I never expected, my dear boy, that you would make much way with that wretched old man; but I saw that it was necessary that your position with respect to Eleanor should be defined.'

'Yes,' said I, rather doubtfully, I suppose, for Aunt Ben continued:

'You *have* made up your mind as to your future course, have you not, Fred?'

'Well,' said I, 'I cannot do Eleanor the injustice of depriving her of her grandfather's fortune, can I? It would be shameful to allow her to sacrifice so much for me, though I do not doubt she would be willing to do so.'

'Very good,' said my aunt dryly.

'At the same time, you know,' added I hastily, 'I have no idea of giving Nelly up.'

'Better,' said Aunt Ben, 'much better. I began to think that old gentleman had got the advantage of you. Well, what are you going to *do?*'

'I must wait,' said I, rather testily, for I was annoyed that she should have thought me capable of giving Nelly up. 'You would not advise my killing Mr. Bourne off-hand, would you?'

'Not while the detective is about here,' replied she with gravity. (For that vigilant official was still what he called 'prosecuting his researches' in the neighbourhood, at Cecil's expense.) 'But you can't wait here,

with nothing to do *but* wait; you must let the Manor-house, and live in London.'

'This is what I should like to do, of course,' said I. 'But are you sure that *you* can live there, Aunt Ben? I know you detest town.'

'My dear Fred,' replied my aunt affectionately, 'wherever your happiness lies will henceforward be my home. I should have hoped you understood that. If you have still a fancy for trying your fortune on the stage, by all means do so. Any occupation is better than none. I only wish I could help you in this one; but, except as a female pantaloon, I don't see my way to do so. I will not, however, be any obstacle, be sure of that—while if you fall amongst wicked women, as I believe all actresses are, and that Lady Repton as bad as any of them—'

'My dear Aunt Ben,' cried I, 'you astonish me!'

'O, I daresay. If any woman ever made

love to a boy in her life, that woman made love to you. Lor' bless you! you must think me blind. However, for the future, *I* will take care of you. I shall tell Eleanor to make herself perfectly easy in her mind, for I will be your chaperon.'

With a hearty laugh, she kissed me, and then began quite a serious talk about business affairs. If we could only let the Manor-house, we should have a sufficient income between us to live very comfortably together in town; and we decided to advertise it immediately, so as to be in plenty of time for the hunting season. I might without doubt have sold it at a good price to Mr. Bourne, who was exceedingly desirous of possessing it; but I did not like to part with the last piece of land that remained to the Wrays, nor with the old house, which my father loved—and especially to his enemy.

Gatcombe Manor was situated in convenient proximity to no less than three

packs of foxhounds; it had ample stabling; and there was a legend, which the house-agent took upon himself to narrate as a fact within his private experience, that grouse had been seen upon the moor: these were the points on which his advertisement mainly dwelt; while our fine situation, and the magnificent prospect we enjoyed, were mentioned as subsidiary attractions. With this same enterprising agent my aunt had now a deadly quarrel: he had full leave to advertise freely, and he abused that liberty by patronising the columns of the *Turnip Top*. Happily for the success of his letter of apology, it was accompanied with an intimation that the house was let. Sir Richard Harewood, a sporting widower of middle age, was the lessee. My aunt wrote to inquire whether he had any small children—she had always an idea that our furniture was very valuable, and not to be exposed to ravage — and his answer was satisfactory, though curt: 'Thank Heaven,

I have none, madam, either small or great.' He had fifteen horses, and as many thousands *per annum;* and his humour was, it seemed, to hire country-houses, and not encumber himself with a seat of his own. He came down in person to be 'interviewed.' A thick squat man he was, with a watery eye, and an unnaturally hoarse voice, acquired in the hunting-field, or from the brandy bottle, or perhaps from both.

'He'll have dogs all over the house,' was my aunt's comment, when he left us an accepted suitor.

'I hope he will do no worse,' thought I.

There was something about Sir Richard which made us feel no regret that he only took the place as a yearly tenant. This arrangement also afforded me an excuse for revisiting Gatcombe at the end of a twelvemonth. I was resolved to see Eleanor then, at all hazards; but for the present I was doomed to leave home without even wishing her good-bye. My aunt persuaded

me to forego a farewell which would be certain to exasperate the old man against his grand-daughter, and promised to say all she could for me, in my place. Alas! 'How little would that be!' I thought, though the dear good soul had all the will in the world to serve me. But even these good intentions of hers were frustrated, for Mr. Bourne remained in the room during the interview from first to last, with an evident resolve to prevent my name being mentioned; and it never was.

'Nelly gave me this little book as a parting gift,' said my aunt, when she had done her narration, which had greatly depressed my spirits.

'It looks a very pretty one,' sighed I.

'Yes; and it's a sort of book I'm so very fond of, you know—Lamb's *Specimens of the Old Dramatists.*'

'Why, she must have meant that for *me!*' cried I excitedly. 'I remember tell-

ing her I wished to have it. Didn't she say that?'

'How *could* she, you silly boy! She said, however, that she gave it with her kindest love, and that she had worked a book-marker for it. Here it is; and it's very lucky that wretched old man didn't happen to look at it. *Wait and Hope* is the motto—the application of which, Fred, I daresay you will be able to make out for yourself. At all events,' added the old lady, with a sigh that was not perhaps altogether affected, 'I don't see how it can apply to *me*.'

That little strip of ribbon was afterwards an amulet against many an evil. Its colours faded, but the love and constancy of which it was the assurance never lost their brightness for me; when I was cast down, it cheered me; when I was weary with waiting, it invigorated and gave me courage; when I was tempted to be disloyal, it reproached me with its simple faith.

Before we finally took leave of Gatcombe, a third letter arrived from Cecil. It contained an enclosure which was put by with the rest; it was the last communication which he sent for Ruth, since, in the mean time, he had heard from me that she had left Wayford without leaving her address; it was the last, too, that breathed of cheerfulness and hope.

'Don't fear for us,' wrote he, 'though I daresay the details of our adventurous life will astonish you. I always promised you that you should see my face again, and so you shall. In any case, you will have our bones, if the custom of the people hereabouts is adhered to in our case. The Indians among whom we are now staying' (there were other Europeans with them of both sexes, and a large escort) 'live in villages built on posts above the water, which, though their architecture does not remind one of Venice, are very picturesque. They "bone" their deceased relatives in this way:

the corpse is tied to a rope, and placed under water, and *in one day* the "Caribe" fish strips it of every particle of flesh, and leaves it a clean-picked skeleton. Thereupon, they separate the bones with ease, and put them in highly ornamented baskets, of which the contents are so well calculated, that the skull just fits on the top of all like a lid. If the Monkton carrier, therefore, brings you a parcel, some fine morning, of a pyramidal shape, do not let Aunt Ben imagine it is a heath for her conservatory, and be dreadfully disappointed to find it is only myself or Jane. The survivor will make arrangements to have it carriage paid, as far as possible.'

This ghastly drollery did not raise my aunt's spirits respecting Cecil, of whose wild enterprises she wholly disapproved; and she wrote him a long jobation upon the impropriety of taking his sister among people who lived on posts and boned their relatives; but for my part I thought he was

using the best means for effacing painful recollections, and felt every confidence in Jane's ability to take care of herself. I had almost forgotten to say, indeed, that there were a few lines added by Jane herself, describing their mode of life as being very pleasant, and 'my dearest Cecil,' as looking quite himself again, 'though I fear he is still worried about that girl at Wayford!' Their handwritings were so similar, that at first I took the whole letter to be from Cecil only.

In the late autumn, Aunt Ben and I removed to town. We stayed at first at a hotel, a mode of life which my aunt described as 'simple ruination,' and afterwards in lodgings, till we could find a house to suit us. The locality we finally patronised was on the western confines of that region which envy denominates Pimlico. It had, however, no pretensions to fashion, nor, indeed, to form; for, although called Merton-square, it was a very irregu-

lar figure, with a wilderness of a public garden in the midst of it, which perhaps formed its chief attraction in our country-loving eyes. The house had also in its rear a little garden of its own, about ten feet square, in which Aunt Ben worked every morning in an apron fitted with a sort of opossum pouch—in which were kept scissors, and matting, and twine—and a great flapping sun-bonnet. She had no more idea of there being anything peculiar in her costume than had Eve in the garden of Eden; but we had neighbours (which Eve had not), who stared at her a good deal.

The novelty of our mode of life having worn off, and sight-seeing beginning to pall a little, I began to address myself to the pursuit of my proposed profession. From theatre-going my aunt had dropped off, gorged, after the first month; but I still continued to attend the performance of each new piece, in hopes to derive advantage from the lesson. I had, of course, every-

thing to learn so far as stage business was concerned; but as respected the literary merits of these dramas—well, I was not discouraged by the sense of their surpassing merit. It was the beginning of the epoch of Sensation Plays, and the object of the dramatist seemed to be to employ the carpenter to the utmost, and of the actor to emulate the acrobat. Not content with holding the mirror up to nature, the playwright made use of nature herself: lovers were drowned in real water, and came before the curtain dripping, to express their acknowledgments for applause; when a tyrant's castle had to be destroyed, it was effected by *bonâ fide* fire, and the London Brigade were in attendance, to take care that it did not burn 'the house' down as well as the castle. Elopements were effected in yellow postchaises, and a stable was as necessary an adjunct to every theatre as a green-room. Even farce displayed its hansom-cab. Muscle and spring were

the stock-in-trade of the tragedian; and country actors swarmed upon the London boards, to the exclusion of old favourites, because they could jump. Not only was Falstaff's occupation gone, but all fat actors had to Bant. The tariff of payment was regulated by the danger incurred in representing a part. *To climbing up outside tower, hand over hand*, 5*l.* 5*s.* *To falling headlong from the same, in flames*, 10*l.* 10*s.* If I had but thought of composing anything with the leaping-pole 'effects' in it, which I used to exhibit at Gatcombe, I believe it would have been produced at once; but, unhappily, I stuck to the legitimate drama.

After some months of conscientious toil in the way of improvement and excision, I felt that I had put my best play into the best guise of which my powers permitted; and, after having had it carefully copied out by a professional hand, I sent it to the manager of the Corintheum. I fixed on this gentleman for my first victim, because he was not

only the proprietor of a large theatre, but a great patron of dramatic art. No public dinner was ever held in its honour, or for the relief of its professors, but Mr. Magnus was in the Chair, or the Vice, or in some other conspicuous position. One of his stock speeches on such occasions, which was always greatly applauded, was an expression of thankfulness that he had been placed by Providence—and the courtesy of his noble friend (if he would allow him to call him so) the Lord Chamberlain—in a position to 'hold out a helping hand' to his 'brethren' of the sock and buskin; and in the word brethren he wished to be understood to include authors as well as actors; all young aspirants to fame; the sucking (if he might be permitted the expression) Shakespeare as well as the budding Garrick. His hand was open to them all.

I had heard it said of Mr. Magnus, that if his hand *was* open there was never any-

thing in it; but with that I did not concern myself; I did not want money for my play, but only a hearing.

Years have gone by since the date of which I speak, and managers and I have come to an understanding long ago; but even now the waiting and watching for news of that unhappy play still recur to me with a pang. Great Heaven! what must those poor wights, then, suffer who write plays for bread! In my country innocence, which identified the position of a great London manager with that of a gentleman, and in my ignorance of the depths of human selfishness, I construed the silence of Mr. Magnus as a sign that the *Pedlar's Pack* had been received with favour. If otherwise, thought I, I should surely have had a line to that effect, or the manuscript itself would have been returned to me. In the short note which I had sent with it, I had enclosed stamps for that very purpose; and valuable as I was ready to believe the

time of Mr. Magnus was, I felt that he might have spared one minute to have addressed my precious manuscript to Merton-square, even if he could not have given five to its perusal. I say 'five minutes,' for if within that time a play does not attract its reader, he may be justified in giving himself no farther trouble; whereas, if it does attract him, it is not unreasonable to expect that he should go on. So I argued that Mr. Magnus had 'gone on' with the *Pedlar's Pack*, and was more or less enraptured by it: so much so, it seemed, that he could not trust himself to say what he thought about it, far less to put his ideas in writing. Perhaps this good man wished to give me a surprise, and would send me a short note of congratulation one fine morning, informing me that the first rehearsal would take place 'that evening,' and that in the mean time he was engaged in putting it on the stage with every appliance that money could purchase, to insure its success. Per-

haps he would call in person in his wicked brougham — the 'wicked brougham,' however, was a subsequent idea, when I had got to know something more of Mr. Magnus. My feelings towards this eminent personage ran through the whole scale of opinion from veneration to undying hatred. I began by believing him to be a Mæcenas with the wit of Horace. I ended with having the same opinion of him that was entertained by his creditors in general, and the Hebrew race in particular.

After three months, I ventured to send him a courteous reminder that the *Pedlar's Pack* was in his esteemed possession, and that I should be thankful for any news concerning it. I did not expect to get an answer the next day, because it happened to be a great theatrical anniversary, upon which Mr. Magnus was advertised to fill the chair at a public banquet, and did fill it to admiration. I was there myself and admired him. When he observed, as usual, that he

had been placed by Providence in a position to hold out a helping hand to dramatic authors, I almost imagined his benevolent eye was resting upon *me.* But he did not answer my letter the next morning; and when, a month afterwards, I wrote a more peremptory note, demanding to have my manuscript, dead or alive—that is, read or unread—he did not answer *that.* Then I cursed Mr. Magnus in the bitterness of my soul, and took my pigs—I mean the *Pedlar's Pack*—to another market.

CHAPTER XI.

ACCEPTED.

After this unsatisfactory experience with the great autocrat of the British stage, I did not waste so much time in my attempts on other managers. Instead of 'sitting down' before the fortress, and waiting in all due form until its gates should open, I pushed the siege with considerable vigour. Though the old-fashioned weapons of courtesy were certainly not used by the besieged, and were about as useless in my own case as bows and arrows against stone walls, I did not abandon them; but I no longer took it for granted that silence was a good sign; I even began to have an idea that it was a bad sign. And, unfortunately, it was the only sign the managers gave. I very much doubt

whether in any other profession or trade in England such uniform discourtesy and selfishness are to be found as among this class, who have, unhappily, so many persons more or less dependent on their good-will; but, to be sure, I only tried about a dozen of them, and nearly as many were left untried. Moreover, my applications were not invariably treated with contemptuous silence. After the *Pedlar's Pack* had remained for two months in the possession of Mr. Quaver (of the Favourite Theatre), and I had twice requested its restitution, I received a—well—a communication, consisting of two letters and one word, written on the inside of an envelope: 'Ms. lost,' with the great man's initials, 'P. Q.,' attached to it—I suppose for authenticity, though I never had any reason to doubt his statement.

The gloom that settled upon me after this event I was unable wholly to conceal from Aunt Ben's observation.

'My dear Fred,' said she, at breakfast

one morning, as I was perusing the columns of the *Era*, and wondering whether the *Pedlar's Pack* would ever be noticed in that respectable organ, 'why don't you set Lady Repton at these horrible people?'

'*Eureka!*' cried I, jumping up from my seat.

'I'm what?' said my aunt sharply.

'You're right; you've hit it: you're a dear old thing!' exclaimed I with enthusiasm. 'I'll write to her this very moment. Why on earth did you not suggest it to me before?'

My aunt did not reply, nor was it necessary for her to do so. I could easily imagine that nothing but the spectacle of my extreme chagrin and disappointment could have induced her to propose such a remedy. She had always disliked Lady Repton and what she termed her 'art,' meaning, not the profession in which she had distinguished herself in early life, but a certain faculty for making herself agreeable to the male sex,

which was not, perhaps, wholly natural or unsophisticated. I, on my part, had by no means forgotten her; but I had never thought of using her influence in the way that my aunt suggested. Self-conceit had probably prevented my doing so. I had looked forward to writing to her upon the success of my first play, to thanking her prettily for the early encouragement and advice which had led to it, to asking her to come up to town, and see it acted; and now— Well, things had come to such a pass that I felt genuinely grateful to my aunt for a proposition which gave me some hope that my poor play would at least reach a manager's eye, though I was no longer sanguine enough to believe that there was not a great distance between that organ and the ear of an audience. So I wrote to Lady Repton, depicting my troubles, in Indian ink, and by no means sparing the authors of them.

She replied by return of post.

MY DEAR FRED,—I was charmed to hear from you, notwithstanding the melancholy character of your communication, and I am afraid I could not help laughing a little over your woes. By whose experience could you possibly have been misled to expect courtesy in the manager of a theatre? If you find one with common honesty, you will be exceptionally fortunate, believe me. It is a mistake, however, to suppose that they have no consideration for anybody; they have a considerable respect for two classes of their fellow-creatures—namely, noblemen and newspaper critics. The latter class are their tyrants, the former are the only superiors they acknowledge; and they cringe to both of them. It is not necessary that a titled person should be a patron of their establishment in order to insure their respectful attention; and I have no doubt that the enclosed note from my husband, if you choose to forward it to Mr. Magnus, will procure at least the restitution of your

manuscript. Lord Repton bids me say he has 'some little reputation' in dramatic matters, and if he were in town would be glad to assist you—I suppose in composition. For my part, I cannot be half the use to you that I wish to be. You know how long I have been absent from the scenes of my former triumphs; and, alas, there is nothing so short-lived as the memory of us poor artists, as it is now the fashion to call us—we used to be termed actors and actresses; but perhaps it is as well to have changed the name, since the thing, acting, is no longer to be found anywhere. What tales, by the bye, I hear of these burlesques. I hope it is true that the young ladies still retain some drapery on *one* leg; but such stories never lose in the telling. Well, the only acquaintance that remains to me in managerial power is Mr. Coryton (of the Memnon)—twenty years ago, the best walking-gentleman in London, and the *only* gentleman (between ourselves) that *I* ever saw

upon the stage: of course he only *plays* his character, and you will perceive a monstrous difference between his acting and his reality; but still, I think, for the sake of old times, he will treat any friend of mine with some show of attention, and an affectation of geniality which used to become him exceedingly, and won many a warm young heart, no doubt, besides my own. Heigh-ho, what am I saying! I shall write to Corydon (as I used to call him) by to-day's post, and spare you the trouble of introducing yourself. Of course I should like to read the *Pedlar's Pack*, and would gladly come the few hundred miles that lie between us to see it on the stage. I don't doubt its merits, but I hope there is a little time allowed in it, for the characters to change their costume. I remember how you used to ignore all 'carpenters' scenes.' To be sure the stage heroines of the present day wear but little, nor, I may add, that little long; but I daresay they require quite as much time for the

toilet as of old. Besides Mr. Coryton, there is a Mr. Burder, by the bye, who used to be a great dramatic authority in my day. My husband once asked him down to shoot here, when there was some talk of a play of his lordship's being produced in London. Mr. B. had his shooting, and the play did not come out (for which I thank the gods), so the obligation lies (or appears to lie) upon his side; he may perhaps be inclined to work it off in your favour; at all events I enclose a note for him. You had better ask him to your house and 'dine' him. He is tolerably presentable, and likes attention of that sort; but you must let him have a little whisky after dinner.

You say nothing of your Eleanor; that is bad, Master Fred. I am afraid you want some staid person like myself to look after you in the gay city; not that I would accuse your Aunt Ben of being light and frivolous, but that she probably spoils you, and lets you have your own way. I should have

more confidence in the guardianship of Cousin Jane. I often think of that grim young female, and of your good plain Cecil's devotion to her. I am not the least surprised to hear that she has carried him off into savage regions; if he could only find a chief courageous enough to make her his squaw, it would be a happy day for him; and no doubt that is what she is after. But I forget: I am wounding your susceptibilities. She was not without a certain good taste, I allow.—So you have let the old house to Sir Richard Harewood. As lord of the manor, I should have thought you would have had more care for the morals of the villagers than to have admitted such a ne'er-do-well on your premises. Mr. Coryton could tell you a story or two about him; but there, you know I hate scandal. With my respectful compliments to your duenna —I conclude you are sufficiently a man of the world by this time not to leave your letters about—I am yours always devotedly,

ROWENA.

The effects of the intervention of this goddess on my behalf was twofold and immediate. Mr. Magnus became reminded of my existence to the extent of returning me my manuscript by the hands of a special messenger, and Mr. Coryton wrote me a few lines which filled me with gratitude and hope:

My dear Sir,—A letter from my old friend, Lady Repton, informs me that you have a drama that merits attention. I pass by Merton-square daily on my way to my duties here, and shall be happy to look in any day you may choose to appoint—early in the afternoon will suit me best, if that be equally convenient to yourself.—Yours faithfully,

Edgar Coryton.

The note was written upon pink paper, at the top of which the words 'Memnon Theatre' were inscribed in gold.

'What do you think of *that*, Aunt Ben!'

exclaimed I, exhibiting in triumph this highly-decorated epistle, which emitted a charming odour as I waved it in the air.

'It is very fine,' said my aunt quietly, 'and I'll keep it in my handkerchief case, if you will allow me, in place of a scent-packet.'

'But is it not good of Mr. Coryton to come and see me in this friendly fashion, instead of making me dance attendance at the Memnon upon him?'

'It is very good of him indeed,' said my aunt dryly. She was so prejudiced against dear Lady Repton, that I do believe she almost grudged me the good-fortune that had befallen me through her intervention. 'I should think you had better ask him to lunch.'

'Excellent idea!' cried I. 'My dear aunt, you are a genius! Give him the best lunch that money can buy. I will tell him to name his own day, and'—here I hesitated, pen in hand—'most of these people have a

habit of smoking after their meals—you wouldn't much mind his having a cigar here, would you?'

'Not at all, my dear. He shall have everything he wishes. I only regret I cannot execute a *pas seul* to please him'—my aunt had a fixed idea that a theatrical manager was a sort of Sardanapalus, always surrounded by meretricious splendour—'but whatever lies in my power shall be done to please him. If I cannot charm his eye, I can at all events tickle his palate.'

This was not a vain boast of my aunt's, and I had every confidence in the success of the luncheon. Mr. Coryton named an early day at two o'clock; and the appointed time found us waiting for him with eager expectation in the drawing-room, to which the most fragrant smell of costly viands was wafted from the kitchen.

'As we are to make this our dinner, Fred,' observed my aunt, as she looked at

her watch. 'I do hope Mr. Coryton will be punctual.'

'He said in his note of acceptance that he was a slave to punctuality,' said I.

'Humph!' said my aunt. 'It's ten minutes past two already; that curried lobster will be spoiled.'

At twenty minutes past two, orders were given to 'put back' the more delicate of the dishes.

At half-past: 'There will be nothing for him to eat now but the plovers' eggs,' said my aunt, with a resigned air. At a quarter to three, she observed solemnly: 'Mark my words, Fred; that man won't come.'

At three o'clock arrived a canary-suited footman with another little pink note, which, however, I no longer regarded with admiration.

'My dear sir,' it ran, 'I am in despair at not being able to lunch with you this afternoon. But I am suddenly called away to Richmond. When a lady's in the case—

you know the rest of it. Perhaps we may be more fortunate in meeting one another some other time.—Yours ever,

'E. C.'

'What an impudent scoundrel!' ejaculated I, as I handed over to my aunt this precious epistle.

'I don't think he can be such a *very* gentlemanlike person as Lady Repton gave you to understand,' observed she dryly. 'Well, let us go down to what is left of dinner.' Which we accordingly did, though in my case there was but very little left of appetite.

This was the worst blow that my dramatic prospects had yet received. It was impossible to doubt that Mr. Coryton's 'some other time' meant no time at all; and as I had been greatly elated by hope, so was I now cast down to the very depths of despair. Fortunately, I had already written to thank Lady Repton in anticipation for her introduction to this man,

and there was no occasion to pain her (as I am sure it would have done) by telling her what had come of it. Moreover, there was one more string to my bow in her note to Mr. Burder; if *that* should snap, I made up my mind to give up shooting; for making a hit upon the stage was one thing, but making oneself a butt for managers was quite another.

The note to Mr. Burder was answered by that gentleman in person within twenty-four hours. He was a little corpulent man, with a red face and a black wig, and arrived in a miniature brougham, into which he exactly fitted. I was past transports by this time, but I welcomed him gladly, and thanked him for his prompt visit.

'Not at all, not at all,' said Mr. Burder. 'To be a friend of Lady Repton's is to have a passport to what remains of my heart. There was a time when she made dreadful havoc with it—yes, sir.'

I told him how I had been treated by all those confounded managers, and he laughed till the tears rolled down his vinous cheeks. They were very highly coloured, and puffed out in places, as though he had had his mouth full of precious stones, which showed their gorgeous hues through the skin.

'You have got the right man at last,' said he, 'to do your work for you. You should have come to me at first. Ned Burder is hand and glove with every manager in London.—Would you like tickets for any theatre, madam?'—this to my aunt. 'The free list is never suspended in my case. I've got half-a-dozen orders in my pocket at this moment.'

'You're most kind,' replied Aunt Ben warmly, always grateful for the smallest favour in her own case, though by no means so easily satisfied with what people did for her nephew. 'I am not much of a playgoer in a general way, but if you

can help Fred to get his drama brought out, I shall then accept your offer with infinite pleasure.'

'Well, well, that shall be managed all in good time. Trust to Ned Burder; what man can do shall be done for our young friend.—Thank you; yes, I *do* take lunch, though it's not my principal meal.'

If lunch was not Mr. Burder's 'principal meal,' it struck me, from his performance with his knife and fork, that he must have breakfasted very early; but the fact was, he used the phrase in the same sense that the lawyers use 'without prejudice:' he wished it to be distinctly understood, that nevertheless and notwithstanding the feats he might exhibit in the way of appetite at mid-day, he was quite open to an invitation to dinner. His angling with this intent—when one got to know him—was a most amusing spectacle; and when he had quite securely hooked his fish, he would play it, as though it was really of

no consequence whether he landed it or not. 'Upon my life, I have no right to come. "Sir William," or "my Lady D.," I fear, are counting on me; but still—'

Here the fish would nearly get off.

'But if you have a previous engagement, Mr. Burder—'

'No, no, no,' he would put in precipitately. 'It was not *settled*, my dear sir, and this *is* settled. My word is passed, and I am yours for the evening.'

On one occasion, when my aunt and I had shown some resolution in closing the dining-room door against him—I think for a whole week—he revenged himself very characteristically.

He called and lunched—for we could not stop *that*—and as he took his leave, observed with a smiling countenance: 'Have you two good people any engagement for Tuesday, now?'

He had often promised us a box at the Opera, and I thought it was come at last;

and Aunt Ben, who doted on music, though she turned her back upon the stage during the ballet, thought so too.

'No,' said I, rather briskly; 'we have no engagement.'

'That's capital,' said Mr. Burder. 'Then I have a capital plan: *I'll come and dine with you*—and I tell you what—*I'll bring a friend with me.* He's a nephew of mine—just as Fred is of yours, madam—a Blue-coat boy. The fact is, I promised his father to take notice of him, and introduce him to good society; and what better opportunity can he have than to come here!'

If my poor father had been alive, he would certainly have compared this worthy to Solomon's Abra:

> 'Burder was ready ere we called his name,
> And though we asked another, Burder came.'

He took my drama away with him on the first day, under pretence of 'looking it over,' and kept it for months, under-

going 'a few touches;' 'little niceties, my dear friend' [he leaped from 'my dear sir' to 'my dear friend' at a bound], 'which no genius, however great, can effect, but only one who has a thorough acquaintance with stage business.' My firm belief is that he never read one single line of the *Pedlar's Pack*. He avoided the subject as though it was a topic of exceeding delicacy, and when I pressed it, tapped his nose, corrugated his eyebrows, and whispered, like a stage villain: 'All is well; we must have patience.'

Of course, if there had not been much to like in this old reprobate—for indeed he amused us both exceedingly—he could not have imposed on me so long (for we believed in him for months); and even when the crisis came, I could not find it in my heart to be angry with him.

Mr. Burder had been dining with us (of course), and was partaking of his third glass of whisky-and-water after dinner,

when I suddenly fell upon him with the inquiry: 'Now, where is this play of mine to be brought out, Burder, supposing you ever finish your "few touches"? Or is it not to be brought out at all? Come, I can bear the worst.'

'Brought out? Of course it will be brought out, my dear young friend—that is, in time. All is well—'

'No; it is not,' I interrupted him sharply. 'I want to hear the truth. You promised me your advice six months ago. What is it? It's no use your laying your finger on your nose' (perhaps *I* had been taking whisky-and-water too, but I know I felt desperate); 'you might just as well put your thumb to it, and spread your fingers out.'

Mr. Burder was not at all angry. He nodded, affirmatively rather than otherwise, as much as to say that there was, no doubt, some considerable truth in that observation.

'Well, my dear boy, I have been think-

ing about your play for months, night as well as day, believe me, and the conclusion I have come to is *this*. I understand the subject of stage representation thoroughly and practically, you see; it's not an affair of theory with me at all.—Would you mind cutting me one very thin slice of lemon? Your excellent aunt does it beautifully.—Thanks.—Where was I?—Yes, sir, my final advice to you is this. The best way of bringing out your drama—*you* can do it, you know; you are well connected; and you know lots of people that live in country-houses, and so on—*get an amateur company to play it for you*—get it noticed in the principal papers' [I thought of that hateful *Top*], 'and send the notices in slip (I'll show you how) to the London managers.'

I believe, to do justice to the intelligence of Mr. Burder, that this brilliant idea had only occurred to him on the spur of the moment, and that he was by no means sanguine of its favourable reception. But for

my part I roared with laughter. The matchless impudence of this dramatic guide, philosopher, and friend of mine tickled me to the core.

'You don't think it feasible?' inquired Mr. Burder comically, and yet with the air of a man who has done his best. 'You don't see your way?'

'Not quite,' said I gravely. 'I am deeply obliged to you for your advice, but I would not recommend you to repeat it up in the drawing-room. My aunt has an idea that you really proposed to be of service to me.'

'Just so, my dear friend—just so. Well, I won't go up-stairs to-night. And look here, you won't tell her till this time to-morrow; promise me that?'

'Very good,' said I: 'I promise.'

There was something of pathos in the old humbug's air that touched me. His life had been passed, I fancy, mostly among rogues and vagabonds, and Aunt Ben seemed

to him as a firm rock in a quicksand, one whose good opinion he really valued, and would have been loath to lose. He went away without fishing for an invitation—a convincing sign of his perturbed mental condition—and I never expected to see him again.

On the morrow, however, he returned in the highest state of excitement, and glowing like a peony in full bloom.

'My dear Fred,' cried he, rushing into the morning-room where my aunt and I were seated, 'it's done!—Congratulate yourself, excellent Miss Wray; congratulate your nephew! The play is accepted!'

'No!' said I, in genuine astonishment.

'Yes, sir; the *Pedlar's Pack* is accepted, and will be brought out immediately.'

'Dear me, how pleased I am!' exclaimed Aunt Ben. 'Kiss me, Fred.—Mr. Burder, I feel greatly obliged to you.'

'Don't mention it, my dear madam. When I have once said: "Trust to Ned

Burder," you may be assured that I see my way pretty clearly.'

'But where is it coming out, my dear fellow?' inquired I with eagerness. 'At what theatre?'

'Well,' said Mr. Burder cheerfully, 'it's not exactly a theatre; though, looked at from some points of view, it's even a better thing. It's a place that has been called the nursery of the British stage, where Biles, and Ram, and Spiffkins made their first appearance—and I have reason to believe also Garrick and Mrs. Siddons. Your play is coming out, my boy, immediately—think of *that*, *immediately!*—at the Hole-in-the-Wall in Southwark!'

'The Hole-in-the-Wall!' reiterated my aunt. 'Why, it sounds like a public-house!'

'Well, you wouldn't have it a private house, my dear madam,' remonstrated Mr. Burder cheerfully, '*would* you? It *is* a public-house for those who wish to eat, drink, and be merry; but for the more

ethereal spirits, who can appreciate wit and refinement, strong situations, and the best dramatic effects, there is a Hall of Amusement attached to it capable of holding three thousand people, without counting children in arms. The posters will be on all the hoardings in a week, Fred—think of *that*—in red, and green, and yellow! *For the Pedlar's Pack, by Frederick Wray, Esq., of Gatcombe*—yes, sir, we'll have *that;* they like a territorial title down in Southwark—*come early to the Hole-in-the-Wall!*'

CHAPTER XII.

MY PATRONESS.

Upon the Lord Chesterfield principle of leaving your company at the moment you suppose you have made your most favourable impression upon it, Mr. Burder vanished while the green, red, and yellow posters were still flaming before our eyes, and the Hole-in-the-Wall looming vaguely as a Temple of Fame. We heard him laugh triumphantly in the passage, and bang the front door as though he would have emulated a royal salute, before we could quite bring our minds to bear on the situation. My aunt, indeed, seemed to wake up from something very like a dead faint.

'He won't *really* put "of Gatcombe" on those playbills, will he, Fred?' inquired she despairingly. 'Only just imagine it in connection with the—with the Hole-in-the-Wall! It is enough to make your poor father turn in his grave.'

'I don't like it myself, Aunt Ben,' said I, thinking of the general proposition; 'but if it *does* hold three thousand people, I shall certainly have a large audience; and then you heard what he said about its being "the nursery of the stage"?'

My aunt nodded, but scarcely in assent. I don't think she had a better opinion of the Hole-in-the-Wall on *that* account.

'I hope it will all turn out well in the end, Fred,' she observed resignedly. 'All I do beg is, that they may not put "Wray of Gatcombe" on those playbills in green, and yellow, and red.'

I promised that this should not be done, and she expressed herself as satis-

fied, though I knew very well what the dear old soul was thinking about the whole matter, and that the British drama was at a worse discount than ever, in her estimation. She dropped her knitting in her lap from time to time, and moved her lips in a slow mechanical way, as though she was trying to accustom them to utter the words 'Hole-in-the-Wall' composedly—a feat, however, which she never accomplished. At times I would catch her glance turned covertly upon me, with a mournfulness that seemed uncalled for by the circumstances, disagreeable as they undoubtedly were. But Aunt Ben, though not averse to a chat, or even a discussion, had the golden gift of keeping silence on all embarrassing topics, a most rare and excellent thing in woman, and I set down her lugubrious air to the sole account of her sympathy with my dramatic misfortunes. Presently there was a scuffle at the letter-box, and that sharp ring at the

bell which proclaims the postman's ire at having to wait.

'Well, I hope there is some good news to come, Fred,' sighed Aunt Ben.

'There's plenty of it,' remarked I, 'at all events;' and certainly if the budget was to be estimated by its bulk, we had cause to congratulate ourselves. The packet that had defied the letter-box was from Cecil; and there was another letter also, in an unknown hand, which I threw aside for the present. We had not heard from my cousins for months, and had been getting anxious about them, so that this communication was very welcome. To our great joy, we found that they had returned in safety to Europe, and were now in Switzerland, where they were mountaineering with great vigour. 'Jane,' wrote Cecil, 'is more venturesome than I am—and you remember that *I* did not often refuse my leaps at Gatcombe—and excites the admiration of the guides.' He

enclosed their diary for the last few days, full of descriptions of glacier scenery and adventure, with which the graphic annals of the *Alpine Journal* have since made us all so familiar. It was a rich treat to Aunt Ben and me at that time. Of family matters, Cecil said little. I had already received from him a most touching letter (and Jane had written feelingly also), in reply to the news of my father's death: his kind heart had felt for me to the quick, though the same post had borne to him the intelligence of his own bereavement—if one might call it so—in the mysterious disappearance of Ruth from Gatcombe. 'I have no fears except for her happiness,' he had written, 'for she is as honest as the day, and not easily misled; though it pains me to hear nothing of her, I know well that there is nothing but good to hear, and I am saved the pain of having to write again and again: "We must have patience, Rue, and wait Fate's pleasure." One comfort is,

too, that she always knows where to find a friend in you. Your father dead; Ruth fled; and the mystery of Batty's crime uncleared up, and without hope of clearance, form a catalogue of woes indeed: while that last cloud sits on my life, Fred, I shall never, never return to England—perhaps to Europe; never see Ruth again. How could I ask her then—even if I knew where to find her—to think of me as I shall never cease to think of her! May you never know, dear Fred, what it is to feel as I feel while I write these words. Forgive me for making you share even a portion of such wretchedness. I remember that *you* have to be patient too. But then,' added he, with a grim pleasantry that seemed to have taken the place of his former high spirits, 'you wear *your* Rue with a difference.'

In the present letter, there was not one word of Ruth. That his passion for her was unchanged, I felt assured; nay, that

it was its very intensity which kept him silent. As to the philosophy which he had so strangely exhibited at the news of her disappearance, I accounted for it not so much on the ground on which he himself seemed to put it, namely, his confidence in her fidelity and good sense, as because he was secretly not displeased that she had put it out of his power to write to her, what might well seem to him to be his duty to write—namely, that all attempts to discover the author of her brother's death having failed, and even been discontinued, he could no longer, in honour and in justice to herself, consider their engagement as binding.

Aunt Ben, on the other hand, conceived that the absence of any mention of Ruth in Cecil's letter was a sign that time was doing its work with him as respected his 'unfortunate attachment,' and that he was 'getting over it.' She pointed out how in his last letter he had hinted of never re-

turning to Europe, and now his very next communication was dated from Switzerland. 'Mark my words, Fred: your cousin will be in England in six months; nor should I be surprised if he then "settled down," and married respectably.'

As it happened, had we each been allowed ten thousand guesses we should neither of us have in the least foreshadowed Cecil's destiny; but that did not prevent us from settling the matter to our respective satisfactions, and disagreeing with one another very much.

We were so intent upon Cecil and his affairs, that I had quite forgotten the letter that had arrived with his own, until the servant came to take away the breakfast-things, and found it unopened beside my plate. It was but a tiny note, the address of which seemed to have been written either by a child, or a person just beginning to write what is called 'a running hand,' and I turned it over with my fingers

in some curiosity. 'Who on earth can this be from, Aunt Ben?' said I, for I had no secrets from her, and it always pleased her to be appealed to, even on the smallest matters.

'I should think, my dear,' replied she, scrutinising it with gravity, 'that it must come from the manager—or the manageress—of the Hole-in-the-Wall: if it had been sealed with a thimble or a red wafer, I should have been sure of it.—Who *does* it come from? You seem quite interested in the contents, at all events.'

'My dear aunt,' cried I excitedly, 'it's the best news I have had since I came up to town! It is from Miss Brabant, the new actress, of whom we have heard Mr. Burder speak so enthusiastically. We were to have gone and seen her ourselves, you remember, only you would not go to that detestable Mr. Magnus's theatre, you said, to see anybody or anything.'

'But what has Miss Brabant to do with

you?' inquired my aunt, with a marked absence of enthusiasm.

'Nothing with me, aunt; but she will have a great deal, I hope, to do with the *Pedlar's Pack*. She can bring out anything she likes, and she may like my play, you see. She has doubtless heard of it from Mr. Burder. Now I think of it, he did promise to speak to her about it; but I attach no importance to a word he says, and it had escaped my memory. She writes a very polite letter, I assure you.'

'The handwriting is peculiar,' observed my aunt coldly; 'that is, to judge from the address, which is all that I have seen of it.'

I knew Aunt Ben's little prejudice so well, that I had made up my mind not to show her the letter, though its contents were very innocent, and to treat it as a mere matter of business; but her last hint was so very broad, that I could not ignore it. 'This is all that is in the note,' said I: 'Miss Brabant (of the Corintheum Theatre)

presents her compliments to Mr. Frederick Wray, and having understood that he is desirous to bring out a drama on the stage, would be glad to have half-an-hour's conversation with him upon that subject, any afternoon he may please to appoint.'

There was such a silence in the room when I had read aloud these simple lines, that I could hear my aunt knitting.

'Does this—lady—write from the theatre?' inquired she presently.

'No; from her private residence—Laburnum Villa, N.W.'

My aunt only replied 'O!' but it was not one of those *O's* which stand for nothing.

I had always credited Aunt Ben with great good sense, and this behaviour of hers disappointed as well as distressed me. Of course she was not playing the prude upon her own account: if I had been her husband, she would have dispatched me to Laburnum Villa with confidence, and had

the distance been sufficient to demand such refreshment, would have cut me sandwiches for the journey with her own hands. But in the interests of Eleanor she outdid Argus, and had a microscopic eye for the arts of her sex and her nephew's perils. At the same time, as I have said, she never argued; and except for that single 'O,' and a silent protest in her manner, I met with no obstruction from Aunt Ben to visiting Laburnum Villa.

I went thither that very afternoon, with a heart beating higher than it had done yet with hopes of dramatic success. Miss Brabant, although a new addition to the London stage, was a star of considerable magnitude; and stars, I knew, could do what they liked with managers. The *Pedlar's Pack*, it was true, was now bespoken, but that did not so much matter, since there was no part in it quite adapted for this young lady; I had several other dramas in my desk, and one, the *Foot-page*, contained

just the character to suit her: in tights and a violet doublet, she should come out in *that*, and take all London, with the trifling exception of Aunt Ben, by storm. But though I ventured to draw this perhaps too familiar portrait of 'the Brabant,' as I had heard Mr. Burder call her, I felt not a little awed as I neared the residence of the original.

A very pleasant semi-detatched house was Laburnum Villa, standing in quite a garden of its own, with two of those 'dropping-wells of fire' in it from which it derived its name, and with boxes full of flowers at every story. A charming young person was looking over the blind of the dining-room, who might herself have been the arbitress of my dramatic fortunes, for all that I knew; and from the open windows of the first floor, a flood of melody, from voice and instrument, poured down upon me, as I stood on the top step and waited for the door to open, not without some

misgivings as to my reception, like the Peri at the gate of Paradise; for now that I was here, and had rung the bell, it began to strike me for the first time that there was something rather queer about that invitation, after all; not, of course, in the sense in which my aunt had taken it—though, if she had seen Laburnum Villa, her prejudices would, without doubt, have been fortified, since it was far too tasteful a dwelling to look 'respectable'—but in the genuineness of Miss Brabant's letter. Was it not quite as probable that it was altogether a hoax, as that a young lady in her position should have troubled herself to have written to an unknown writer about a manuscript play? It would have been strange even in a manager to have done so; and, indeed, from what I knew of managers, they were about as likely to send me a blank cheque on their bankers without value received, as to perform such an act of patronage. Nor was there a cha-

racter in the *Pedlar's Pack*, as I have said, which could have been pointed out as especially suited to her abilities.

However, it was too late to think of these matters now; I had rung the bell, and it was answered by the same lovely being whom I had seen patronising nature over the window-blind. To my inquiry as to whether Miss Brabant was at home, she first said 'Yes,' then, with a glance at a man's hat on the hall table, corrected herself hastily, and said 'No;' finally, she ushered me into the dining-room, and bid me stay there while she ran upstairs 'to see.' I took great care to put my card into her hand, that there might be no farther mistake, if there should chance to be one already, and waited accordingly. I heard the music cease with suddenness in the drawing-room, and presently a man's step coming down the stair—a slow determined one, like that of a man who carries a horse-whip. Through the half-shut door I caught

a glimpse of his face — thin, bearded, and aristocratic—as he went out, unlike a guest, without attendance from the servant. He was evidently the master of the house. Miss Brabant had on some pretence got rid of her friend and protector — perhaps a duke—in order to give me my promised interview. The next moment, I was ushered into the drawing-room. It was empty, save for the elegant and costly furniture with which it was crowded, and the mirrors that multiplied each object of beauty, though on the open piano still lay the unfinished piece of music, a song from the play then running at the Corintheum. On the table were half-a-dozen of those large luxurious volumes such as are only seen in the houses of very rich or very improvident people, full of rivulets of description and meadows of engravings. I was engaged in examining one of them when the door opened, and in came, or rather swam, my hostess—a spendidly beautiful young wo-

man, with a profusion of jet-black hair, the contrast of which to her complexion, which was as fair and delicate as a lily, was most striking and peculiar.

'Mr. Wray, I believe,' said she, with a graceful courtesy. 'You are better acquainted with me, probably' (here she seated herself, and smiled good-naturedly), 'than I with you.'

Of course, she referred to her performances on the stage, to which it was certainly in the highest degree improbable, considering my proposed profession, that I should not have been a witness.

'I have certainly seen you somewhere before, Miss Brabant,' said I, bewildered by a little host of recollections of fair women, which I in vain endeavoured to marshal; 'though not, I am ashamed to say, upon the stage. Where could it possibly have been?'

The pet of the Corintheum smiled again, but not so good-naturedly as before.

'Perhaps it was some one else of whom I remind you.'

'You are very kind to some one else to say so,' said I gallantly; 'but to mistake another for yourself is hardly possible.'

'That is a very pretty speech, sir; but not a prettier one than you owe me for having had the hardihood to confess that you never saw me act.'

The arch tone and artificial laugh were new to me; I listened in vain for some familiar note which should dissolve the mystery of her identity. In this mental maze, I had almost forgotten what my fair companion had said, till an angry pout on her pretty lips recalled it to my memory. Then I hastened to explain to her how it was that I had hitherto debarred myself from the pleasure of seeing her on the boards of the theatre through detestation of Mr. Magnus.

'So you hate old Mag, do you?' said

she comically. 'Well, then, we have already something in common between us.'

'But I thought—'

Then I stopped suddenly, with a blush, for I saw that her eye had caught mine as it mechanically moved over the costly appointments of the apartment.

'You thought that I was his debtor,' observed Miss Brabant coolly, 'and therefore his friend? A dramatist should know better than to identify the two relations. As it happens, however, I am neither. I came up to town with little or no reputation as an actress, and called on the great man, who at once recognised what he was pleased to call "my talents." Now he is angry with me, I hear, and says that my face was my fortune. Well, if so, it has been his fortune also. If he gave me a helping hand, I have filled it for him.—S he treated you ill, did he, about your play

I poured into her dainty ear my wo making as merry with them, however, a

could. At Mr. Coryton's letter, pleading his Richmond engagement as an excuse for not coming to luncheon, she laughed heartily.

'How like the vain old creature!' cried she. 'Why, that was *me!*'

'Dear *me!*' said I, like an echo, and before I could stop myself.

'O yes; I remember it quite well. There were fourteen of us engaged to an early dinner — except on Sundays, you know, we poor actors cannot dine late— at the Star and Garter; and just at the last, one failed us, when Mademoiselle Agile (the great dancer, you know), who is a *dévote*, and very superstitious, refused to go unless we could procure a *quatorzième;* so I sent for old Cory.'

'O, I see,' said I.

It was somehow a great relief to me to hear that there had been twelve other persons at that Richmond dinner beside Miss Brabant and that fellow Coryton.

Then we began to talk of Mr. Burder, from whom, it seemed, she had first heard of my being a writer of plays.

'It was very good of him to mention it,' laughed she; 'for, you know, he writes for the stage himself.'

'*He* write!' cried I. 'Impossible!'

'I said he wrote *for* the stage, Mr. Wray —anybody can do that; I don't say that a play of his was ever accepted. Not that he is by any means a stupid man—indeed he is very amusing; but he is the greatest bore and nuisance with his rejected manuscripts that you can imagine.'

'But how was it, then, may I ask,' said I, 'that this unpromising advocate of mine contrived to enlist your sympathies for my unhappy case, which you denied to his own?'

Miss Brabant blushed, and hesitated.

'Well, perhaps—'

Where *had* I seen her before? Where *had* I heard those tones, which, for an instant, I seemed so positively to recognise?

She said something laughingly, I believe, about having a fancy to play the patroness to a young Sheridan, if not a Shakespeare; but I did not pay much attention, being occupied with the riddle that was perplexing me. She went on, however, to ask point-blank to see the *Pedlar's Pack*. I had taken the precaution to bring a copy of it in my pocket, as the best example of my dramatic efforts. She read a page or two with such evident satisfaction that, for fear she should throw away her praises, I mentioned, not without a blush of humiliation, that it had been bespoken within the last twelve hours for the Hole-in-the-Wall.

'How on earth came that about?'

'Well,' said I, more humiliated by her amazement than ever, 'I can hardly tell you. It was Mr. Burder's doing. He seemed to expect me to be grateful; and, indeed, according to his own account, he has really taken great pains.'

'That's all rubbish, Mr. Wray,' exclaimed Miss Brabant. 'He has simply answered an advertisement in the *Era*, and sold your play for five shillings a night, or given it away altogether. He has done you a great injury, or I am much mistaken. Who introduced you to this man?'

'Well, the same person who wrote in my favour to Mr. Coryton — but I forgot, I did not tell you: it was the once famous actress, Lady Repton.' Quick as thought, and at the very instant my lips formed the name, the association of ideas between Lady Repton, Gatcombe, and my fair hostess was a perfect chain. I think she read my recognition of her in my eyes, for she smiled after her own natural fashion before I could stammer out the words: 'Why, you are Ruth Waller!'

'Not yet, Master Fred,' said she.

Then, stepping to a mirror, she removed the mass of raven hair that con-

cealed her own golden tresses, and came forward in her own proper person — far more beautiful, I thought, than in her assumed guise—with both her hands held out in welcome.

CHAPTER XIII.

AUNT BEN HAS 'A LITTLE SURPRISE' FOR ME.

My first thought, as I looked at Ruth, and while I still held her hands in mine, was: 'What would poor Cecil give to be in my place?' She had always been very beautiful, but her beauty—as happens with most blondes—was not of that sort which unadorned is adorned the most. Art—by which I mean the arts of elegance and fashion—had heightened it to an extraordinary degree, and yet she had not lost her honest country look; her smile had the old sunshine in it still, and not the lime-light.

'So it was to shine in London that you left us all in darkness at Gatcombe, was it, Ruth?'

'Yes, Master Fred,' said she quietly.

'It was the example of your Lady Repton that tempted me to try my fortune on the stage. I could not live on at Wayford, you know; I could not be a burden on—on Mr. Cecil all my life; and since he had taught me something—all I know, indeed, that is worth anything—of how to speak a speech—I resolved to gain a hearing.'

'And you have put out your talent to some interest, Rue.'

'You mean that I get money?' said she simply. 'Well, yes, I do; but I had money to begin with—Mr. Cecil's—or else I doubt not matters would have been very different. If I had come to Mr. Magnus poor—' She shuddered, and broke off. 'But I was rich, or seemed to be so; and he was pleased to say he thought that I should suit him, and would draw. And I *did* draw, you see.'

'Yes, Rue, and you don't paint,' said I admiringly, 'which does you great credit. You seem to me just the same simple kindly girl you were at Wayford—'

'Then I must be indeed an actress born,' interrupted she with bitterness. 'Don't think it, Master Fred; don't think me "simple," nor a girl, at all; I am a woman grown, that knows, too, how to hold her own against—her friends. God help all women such as I who don't! "Kindly," you said too. Well, perhaps I am: there may be something left of heart about me; but surely I should have been something less than kind, and lower, if, when I heard *your* name, and felt that it might be within my poor power to help you on the path that you have chosen, I had not written to say so. Your visit here is like a breath of fresh air from the high moor at Gatcombe!'

In such a tone of disappointment and dejection were these words of welcome spoken, that a suspicion vague and chill began to steal over me, the influence of which I could not resist.

'The air is pure *here*, is it not, Ruth?' said I with significance.

'Why ask that question?' inquired she angrily. Then added: 'But I forgot: you have a right. Well, you may tell your cousin he has no cause to be ashamed of me. What made you think he had?'

'Nothing,' said I hesitatingly.

'Yes, there was: come, be frank with me.'

'Well, I had no idea, of course, that this was *your* house; and I did think it strange—though indeed it was no stranger than my own presence here—to find a gentleman—'

'I see,' she laughed out merrily. 'Well, that was my music-master. I am quite ignorant of such things, of course, and Mr. Magnus says it is necessary to learn a song or two. Is there any other count against me, Master Fred?'

'*Against* you? No,' said I. 'But do you think Cecil would approve of your being an actress at all, Ruth?'

'I don't know, Master Fred.' She

looked exceedingly embarrassed; her quick flow of words at once deserted her, but she spoke firmly enough, like one whose course of conduct has been decided upon. 'I don't know if he would or not; but how *could* I remain dependent on his bounty when I might never be his wife? He told me that himself at parting; and now—since nothing has been discovered down at Gatcombe—our union is farther off and more doubtful than even then.'

'But why did you leave Wayford without letting me know your address, Ruth?'

'Well, that was wrong,' said she; 'but I was ashamed—not of going upon the stage—but lest I should fail; and when I had succeeded' (she hung down her head), 'I was still ashamed.'

'Then if you had not chanced to hear of me and of my play, you would have remained "Miss Brabant," and never revealed yourself at all?'

'I cannot say. Don't press that: let it

suffice that when I saw an opportunity to help you, I did not resist it; indeed, I could not. It is dreadful to be quite alone in the world, Master Fred. Quite alone,' she added, with a bitter smile, 'and yet among so many friends!'

'I have three letters for you, Ruth, that should have been delivered long ago: I was to have forwarded them—'

'Have you no recent ones?' interrupted she.

'How should I have, when I had informed him you had disappeared?'

'True. But he has written to *you* recently, has he not?'

'Yes; only yesterday, as it happens, though after a long interval of silence. He is in Switzerland.'

'What! coming home?' cried she, almost, as it seemed to me, in alarm.

'I think not, though my aunt, with whom I am now living, as Mr. Burder doubtless told you, is of the contrary opinion.'

'And what does he say of me *now?*'

Here it was my turn to feel embarrassed; for, as I have said, Cecil had not even mentioned her name in his last letter. 'Well, you see, it was useless his saying much, since—'

'I see,' interrupted she with gravity; 'he says nothing.'

'But his first letters, Ruth, were full of you, and I have no doubt that those of which I have charge are laden with his love. I will send them to you this evening.'

'It is no matter,' said she quietly; 'for I shall not read them.' I looked astonished, and she added pathetically: 'Why should I do so, Master Fred? A love that is blighted and can never ripen, is a dead love. Why should I wound my heart afresh, all to no purpose?'

'But it *may* ripen, Ruth: time smooths all things but its own wrinkles. My cousin will not always feel so deeply the poison of that cruel accusation which Batty

left within him, like a bee's sting, before he died.'

Ruth shook her head, not despondingly, but in absolute negation.

'Well, time alone can show it,' said I. 'Jane describes her brother as being decidedly more cheerful.'

'His sister is still with him, then?'

'Of course; he clings to her more than ever in his loneliness and anxiety about yourself.'

Deep in thought, Ruth remained silent for a space; then with tender earnestness inquired: 'Will you grant me, for the sake of old times, dear Master Fred, one favour?'

'Most certainly,' said I. 'What is it?'

'Do not mention to Mr. Cecil that you have found me.'

'As you please,' said I; for Cecil's last letter made silence on this point comparatively easy to observe. 'But you will let me tell Aunt Ben?' This I stipulated for, since otherwise I should scarcely have been

able to explain my visit to Laburnum Villa satisfactorily.

'Yes, you may tell your aunt.'

Then I rose to go, for our interview had been a long one.

'I will keep your play, Master Fred; and shall be glad to read the other of which you spoke. There is just one thing more—you have never mentioned Miss Eleanor.'

'If I have not,' said I, smiling, 'it was only because my mind was occupied with your affairs. She is quite well, and at Gatcombe.'

'And all is well between you?'

'Yes, indeed. Why should you ask?'

'Because I knew your answer would make me happy. Well, you should have no secrets from one another, and you can tell *her* too that I am Ruth Waller. She will not shrink from me because I am a play-actress, as your Aunt Ben will do. If she were here this moment, she would take my hand, and—and pity me, as she was

wont to do in those sad days at Gatcombe. But there, I have to play Florella in two hours' time, and must not have red eyes.—Good-bye, and thank you, Master Fred.'

'Good-bye, Ruth, and thank *you*.'

Not till I left Laburnum Villa, and was on my way home alone, did the strangeness of my late discovery strike me with its full force. That Ruth should have gone on the stage, and succeeded upon it, did not astonish me so much when I called to mind the change that had been already apparent in her during our last interview at Wayford; that she should not have revealed her purpose while its accomplishment was doubtful, was also explicable enough; but when she had gained her object—had, indeed, been eminently successful, and that, as she assured me (and I did not doubt her), without loss of self-respect—why *then* she had not written to say, 'I am well and prosperous, Master Fred—tell Mr. Cecil,' was a mystery I could not unravel. For I was no

longer of opinion that Ruth did not love my cousin; it seemed to me, on the contrary, that she was apprehensive of loving him too much, and in vain. If she did not care for him, why should she have expressed her resolve not to read those long-delayed letters, without doubt so full of passionate ardour, and have forbidden me to inform him of her calling or place of abode? Like Cecil himself, she probably believed their union to be hopeless, though not on the same grounds. I had never heard from her (though Cecil had said something about her entire acquiescence in his view of the matter) that Batty's accusation against my cousin, so long as it remained disproved, was in *her* eyes also an insuperable bar to their union; but it was likely enough that from what she knew of his character, she foresaw that it would prove so. Moreover, it struck me, from the half-resentful tone in which Ruth had said, 'His sister is still with him, then?' that she gave my Cousin

Jane more credit than she deserved as another source of opposition to their union. Jane had, in reality, no power in the matter (though, if she had, she would have undoubtedly used it like a wedge to separate them); and should the mystery of Richard Waller's catastrophe be discovered, I felt certain that no argument would for a moment detain Cecil from flying to his beloved's arms. To Ruth, however, it doubtless seemed that even if time should lessen the proportions of that obstacle which constantly presented itself to Cecil's sensitive mind, or even remove it altogether, there was always an enemy of hers at his right hand to interpose new impediments.

And yet, having arrived at all these sage conclusions, I was obliged to confess to myself that Ruth's conduct was an enigma still. It was, perhaps, to get rid of the profitless speculations that filled my mind with regard to her, that I sketched out for myself a little amusement with Aunt Ben, as respected my

visit to Laburnum Villa. Since she had treated poor Miss Brabant, and indeed myself, with such undeserved distrust, it was only just that she should be punished a little. I was strengthened in this determination by finding my esteemed relative by no means recovered from her suspicious state of mind, but maintaining a stately reserve, under which it was easy to detect a most vehement curiosity. She would probably have had her tongue cut out, rather than ask the question: 'Well, and what about that wicked woman?' but if it had been, that inquiry would certainly have been found upon the tip of it.

'My dear aunt,' cried I with enthusiasm, 'she's charming!'

'*Who's* charming?' replied Aunt Ben sharply, and knitting with great rapidity.

'Why, Miss Brabant, of course.'

'I don't want to hear about it, if she is.'

'O, but I *must* tell you,' said I. 'You

have no idea how kind she has been to me. She has not the least nonsense or *mauvaise honte* about her.'

Here my aunt muttered: 'No *honte* of any kind, I daresay;' but I affected not to hear her.

'I don't think I ever saw anybody but Nelly so pretty—her black hair was just like Nelly's; and I do believe she will bring out my *Foot-page* at the Corintheum, and play the principal part herself, in tights. Never was such a piece of good fortune; I— Why, what's the matter, aunt? You surely don't think that I've fallen in love with the woman? Why, what on earth is there to cry about? What's happened? What's the matter?'

For, to my horror and amazement, Aunt Ben had suddenly dissolved in tears, and was now sitting, with bowed head, and her work fallen on the ground, looking an older woman by ten years than I had yet known her.

'Nothing has happened that was not to have been expected, I suppose,' sobbed she. 'Your poor father used to say that men were all alike when flattered by a wicked woman; he had one exception in his mind, however, and there he was wrong. It will break Nelly's heart, I know, and it has nearly broken mine. I had such confidence in you, Fred, and now— Well, Nelly is coming up to us, and she will judge for herself. As for me, I wash my hands of it altogether;' and she wrung her withered palms as though she had already done so, and was drying them in the air.

'Nelly coming up to town,' cried I, 'and to *us!* Why, when did you know that?'

'What does it matter?' sobbed my aunt, 'when you will be half your time at Laburnum Villa, or rehearsing things at the theatre with this abandoned young person in—tut—tut—tights.'

'My dear aunt,' said I gravely, 'this

has gone too far. You were mistaken in the whole matter from the first, and out of a little revengeful malice, I did not undeceive you. But the fact is, that this Miss Brabant is no other than Cecil's young woman, Ruth Waller.'

And in a few words I told her all. She listened with great interest, and when I had finished, seemed never tired of putting questions on her own account. 'You shall hear everything in time,' said I at last; 'but tell me first about Nelly's coming to town.'

'Ah, but suppose she isn't coming,' said my aunt. 'If you play tricks on me, why should not I on you?'

If Aunt Ben was joking, her merriment was of a very ghastly kind, and even a little hysterical as well. I felt certain that not only was Nelly coming, but that something very serious had occurred to induce her to do so.

'If there is news from Gatcombe, let

me know it, aunt,' said I; 'you have no right to keep it from me.'

'Well, Fred, there *is* news, and great news; but whether it be good or not is another question. But first, let me ask, have you noticed nothing peculiar in the tone of Eleanor's letters of late?'

'They have seemed to me to be written with effort,' said I; 'not, of course, as regards their affectionate warmth, but their cheerfulness. She tries to make the best of herself; but her long separation from us, and the being shut up alone with that hateful old man at Gatcombe, appear to tell upon her more and more.'

'And that is all,' murmured Aunt Ben, half to herself. 'O Fred, you little know what that dear creature has been suffering!'

'Is Nelly ill?' cried I. 'What *do* you mean?'

'Yes; ill in mind, Fred—sick at heart. Persecuted by him who was bound to be her protector, she has confided in me alone,

because, if you had known of it, matters would have been made worse. You would have gone to Gatcombe, carried her off under the old man's nose, and probably kicked Sir Richard.'

'Kicked Sir Richard Harewood? Kicked our tenant?'

'Yes, because he has been making love to Eleanor. — There, now, I knew you would put yourself in a tantrum. It's no use your snatching up your hat and stick. The matter is now arranged, and Sir Richard has got his *congé*. But poor Nelly's position has been making me miserable for weeks. I did not like to tell you of it, partly for the reason I have mentioned, and partly because I saw you were so depressed about your play. Every morning I said to myself: "I will tell him to-day;" and every day something occurred with Mr. Burder—or did not occur—which put you in bad spirits. "What is the use of making him more miserable than he is,"

thought I, "when any remedy he may take in his own hands would only make matters worse?" Yesterday I was on the very point of telling you; and then that news about the Hole-in-the-Wall came, and I hadn't the heart to do it. Even when this Miss Brabant wrote to you, and it seemed to me that you were about to fall into the net of a bold and forward young person, I still hesitated, since Eleanor had laid on me such strict injunctions to keep her secret; but when you came home to-night, and talked of that undesirable acquaintance so enthusiastically (you naughty boy, to take in your poor old aunt!), then I said to myself: "How *can* he, *can* he do so? O, if he only knew that his own Eleanor was coming to town!"—and then I told you,' added my aunt quietly.

'But you haven't told me, Aunt Ben, or at least only enough to make me anxious.' And, indeed, when I began to couple this news with the significant way in which

Ruth had inquired whether all was well between myself and Eleanor — doubtless with reference to this Sir Richard Harewood, better known (as I was well aware) than spoken of in theatrical circles—it was natural enough I should feel anxious. He was quite capable, from what I had heard of him, of persecuting a girl with his attentions, however unwelcome they might be.

'Well, Frederick,' said Aunt Ben gravely, 'the long and short of the matter is, that that dreadful old Mr. Bourne has been throwing Eleanor at Sir Richard's head. He always liked a title dearly; and no doubt it would have been an additional satisfaction to him if he could have secured a baronet for a son-in-law, and at the same time got you jilted.'

'What an old villain!' ejaculated I.

'Yes, but fortunately also what an old fool!' continued Aunt Ben. 'The way he went to work was the very course most fitted to disgust his grand-daughter, and make her

take another view of what she had hitherto considered to be her duty as regarded himself. She wrote to me a week ago, that she had told her grandfather that if Sir Richard came to the rectory again, she should leave his roof, and throw herself upon my protection; and as for his money, she frankly told him he might give it to whom he pleased. This indifference to her inheritance must, I suppose, have seemed incredible to the old wretch, or perhaps he doubted her determination; but, at all events, he permitted the baronet to pay another visit; and yesterday, Nelly wrote to say she's coming.'

'When?' cried I excitedly. 'O, when?'

'Well, in a day or two. In time to see your play at the Hole-in-the-Wall: and certainly, in time to see the other—at the what do you call it?—in which your beautiful Miss Brabant is to act in tights, sir.'

But I was too much excited and delighted by Aunt Ben's news to feel her satire.

'Dear Fred,' continued my aunt with increased gravity, 'this is all my doing as respects Eleanor coming hither, for at the first hint of her trouble I invited her; and I do hope that you will not give me cause to repent it. I trust to your good feeling not to use your influence to precipitate a marriage. She will have left her grandfather, it is true, for good and all, as she thinks; and he will have told her that his wealth will now pass into some other channel; and perhaps he is really bent on carrying out that design. But, on the other hand, he may not be so; or if his threat of disinheritance is put in effect for the present, the ties of blood grow stronger as we approach our end, and at the last his heart may turn towards her. He cannot live for ever. And remember, Fred, however indifferent you yourself may be as to whether your wife comes to you as a great heiress or empty-handed, there are others to be considered in this matter; not only Eleanor herself, of whose simplicity we

must not take advantage, but also those unborn, who may one day reproach you both for a selfish precipitation. Your motto, therefore, must still be, "Wait and hope."'

'So be it,' said I eagerly; 'it will be happiness enough for the present to see her here under our own roof.' And, indeed, I spoke the truth, for this unexpected news had fairly transported me. But, on the other hand, it made me nervous and apprehensive, as the promise often does of a pleasure that seems almost too great to be realised. Although I knew that Nelly was not one to be intimidated, or to be kept in subjection unless from a sense of duty, and that all folks around Gatcombe were her friends, and would be, if necessary, her helpers, I was consumed by vague forebodings. The sunshine of Hope was with me, and was also, I well knew, with my darling, but there loomed a dark cloud above the intervening space, which seemed to menace Hope's fruition. Such presentiments of evil

are common enough, but seldom verified; and when they are so, the misfortune which we dread comes as often as not from some quite unexpected quarter, and fills us all the more with terror and dismay.

END OF VOL. II.

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